



Digital Devil Story

Reincarnation of the Goddess

By: Nishitani, Aya

Prologue

Chapter 1

This story takes place eighteen years ago, when most people did not even know of the existence of the Internet, and personal computers were normally thought of as standalone devices.

In the town called Kuniritsu, a suburb of Tokyo, there was a school known as Jusho High. Everything began in this school one day when a tall student burst into the classroom, as if he was just waiting for class to end.

"You Nakajima?"

The tall student stormed over to the seat of Nakajima Akemi, a handsome young man who stood out amongst the rest of his class, and slammed the top of the desk as if to threaten him.

"Yes, that's me..."

Ignoring the sudden vibration that the desk sent through his body, Nakajima stood up resolutely and looked the student in the eye. It was Kondo Hiroyuki, the captain of the karate club and the unofficial "boss" of Jusho High among the students. In the past he had forced more than one student that had dared to oppose him to change schools--usually through violent means. But Nakajima had never even interacted with Kondo before; he certainly couldn't think of anything that he might have done to make him this angry.

What gives? I haven't done anything.

Nakajima gulped and started to open his parched mouth to speak. At that moment, he heard a suppressed giggle from behind him. Turning his head, Nakajima saw a bewitchingly charming girl, one that almost seemed too old to be a student, staring at him like a cat with a gaze that was alluring and at the same time full of malice. It was Takamizawa Kyoko, one of his classmates. All of a sudden, Nakajima understood everything.

"Hold on a minute!"

The same instant Nakajima spoke, a fist went flying into his solar plexus. Without even a chance to cry out, Nakajima spun to the floor, as Kondo followed up his punch with a low kick. That was followed by two kicks to both the chest and the lower stomach--carefully placed with enough force to hurt badly, but not knock their target out. Nakajima's classmates, afraid of getting involved, started to leave the classroom one by one.

"Hear me out...." Nakajima tried hard to protest, but his voice was silenced as Kondo's foot went flying into his mouth, and his tears and saliva spilled out all over the floor.

"I don't wanna hear your excuses. You gotta learn what happens to people who come on to Kyoko."

Kondo kicked Nakajima in the back, knocking him onto his stomach on the ground. Kyoko, who all the meantime was gleefully watching him get pummeled, kneeled down in front of

him and flicked his upper lip with her fingers.

"He's got a face like a woman, yet he dared to try and kiss me!"

"Liar..."

In actuality, it was Kyoko who tried to kiss him, and Nakajima had just pushed her away. After having her pride hurt, Kyoko used Kondo--who had a large crush on her--to get her revenge. But Nakajima didn't have a single friend to corroborate his story. Only his classmate Takai Ken'ichi remained in the room, and even he just stood there looking worriedly at Nakajima through dark green-rimmed glasses, apparently not having the courage to stop Kondo.

Pulling Nakajima up from the floor easily with just his left hand, Kondo thrust his right fist into Nakajima's solar plexus again. The pain felt almost as if his heart was being torn out, and Nakajima tried to cry out. But with the wind knocked out of him, he could neither inhale nor exhale, and all that left his injured lips was a pathetic little moan.

Nakajima had always been something of an independent maverick, not wanting to hurt anyone or get hurt himself, so he had never been beaten like this before. And to think that it was over some stupid reason like rejecting a girl! The combined sensations of pain, anger, and humiliation overwhelmed Nakajima, and the wound in his psyche started to bleed a drop at a time. Seeing him like this, Kyoko watched Nakajima with a look of pure ecstasy in her eyes, and laughed out loud. The sound of her high-pitched laugh reverberating throughout the classroom pierced Nakajima's eardrums and echoed in his skull, awakening an emotion he had never experienced before deep within him.

Damn you...I'll get you...you won't get away with this...

Nakajima's eyes lit up with a fierce, violent look he had never shown before.

"What's with that look?"

Kondo was taken aback for a second by Nakajima's expression, and as if mad at himself for faltering, he punched Nakajima hard in the face. As the crunch of Nakajima's tooth cracking sounded, Kyoko said "Hey, don't you think that's enough?" as if she had lost interest in the whole thing. It was the voice of a dirty, cowardly woman, worried only about protecting herself; if Nakajima was beaten any harder, there would be a real danger of her being held responsible.

"Hey, lucky you! Looks like you've gotten a reprieve. I've gotta say I'm surprised at what a weak little runt you are. Beating you up was just a waste of energy." Twisting his mouth into a smile, Kondo unceremoniously dumped Nakajima's body on the floor like a rag doll.

An hour later, after finally being able to move, Nakajima reached the Chuo-sen Kunitachi train station, supported by Takai Ken'ichi.

"Why don't we sit down?" While propping up Nakajima, Takai cocked his head in the direction of two open seats next to each other nearby.

"Eh?...Oh, sure."

Nakajima collapsed onto the seat and stared forward resolutely, all the while regretting he had ever applied to his school.

Jusho Private High was a famous and prestigious school, and every year more than twenty of its students were admitted to Tokyo University. However, anyone that was familiar with the way the school worked would have to acknowledge the extreme stratification amongst the students. The school was divided into two classes; the general class, and the "gifted" class, which received better facilities, a better curriculum, better teaching materials, and in general were favored much more highly. The "gifted" class, which comprised only about twenty percent of the student body, was always the target of constant jealousy and disgruntlement from the general class. With such a gulf between the classes, the violent incidents that came about from this jealousy were to an extent unavoidable.

Both Nakajima and Takai were part of the gifted class. With his slender frame and delicate looks, if Nakajima swapped his uniform for a girl's sailor suit, he might very well be able to pass for a beautiful teenage girl. Takai's appearance on the other hand was almost the polar opposite. He had a rugged body and thick fingers built up from judo practice, which he had started in junior high. But his personality was not as tough as his exterior, and when he put on his dark green-rimmed glasses, he looked almost like a child.

"That Kondo, he seemed even worse than usual today." Takai spoke almost as if making excuses; he felt a little guilty for not stepping in to help Nakajima.

Nakajima raised an eyebrow and responded half-heartedly. "His energy doubles whenever he's near a woman."

"What the heck is someone like Kyoko doing in the gifted class anyway? Besides, you'd never come on to her in the first place."

"Actually...it was the other way around."

"So it was Kyoko that got rejected then." Takai nodded as if everything suddenly made sense. Lots of girls were interested in Nakajima, but none of them so far had been able to strike his fancy. Seeing his indifference, Takai always guessed that Nakajima must have extremely finicky tastes when it came to women.

The two sat next to each other in silence as the train passed through Musashi-Sakai station. Takai took a sidelong glance at Nakajima's profile. Among the students of the gifted class, Nakajima's grades were not particularly high. In contrast to Takai, who got good grades in just about everything, Nakajima was really only good at math and science. In the more liberal arts, the only subject he showed real strength in was world history. He wasn't much of an athlete either. However, when it came to computers, nobody in school came even close to being as good as Nakajima--not even the teachers. Takai thought that you probably wouldn't be able to find someone who was as good as Nakajima in that arena if you searched all of Japan, let alone the school. The games that Nakajima would whip up in a matter of days

were fantastic. No matter how popular they were, commercial games just seemed boring after playing one of Nakajima's. Sometimes Nakajima's expression looked positively mad as he hunched over one of the terminals writing programs in the school's CAI (Computer Aided Instruction) room, his fingers flying across the keyboard.

If I'm a prodigy, then Nakajima must be a bona-fide genius. Takai nodded to himself as his gaze turned back to the scenery passing by outside the window.

"Demons, eh...?" The words tumbled out of Nakajima's mouth suddenly.

"Eh?"

"No, never mind."

"Did you just..."

Just as Takai pursed his lips as if to say something, the train arrived at Nishi-Ogikubo station.

"See you."

Nakajima started to walk down the station stairs with his shoulders hunched and a brooding expression on his face.

"Geez, what is he thinking?" Turning away from Nakajima, Takai plopped himself down on the two now-empty seats of the train.

Chapter 2

Behind the shopping district, a banner reading "Lots for Sale" hung from a newly-built apartment building. Nakajima walked ahead, looking downwards while continuously moving his lips. To any passerby, he might have appeared like an ordinary high school student, deep in concentration trying to memorize something for a test. But those few people that caught a fragment of the words he was speaking turned around and gave him suspicious looks. That was because they sounded like the low and hostile muttering of a dark spell, and not at all something that you would expect to hear from a high school student. A cherry blossom fell from the nearby concrete wall and hit Nakajima's cheek, but he ignored it and kept walking, his eyes cast down to the ground. When he finally looked up, he was standing in front of a conspicuously tall apartment building. Placing his electronic key into the keyhole, the solid plate-glass automatic doors slid open with a heavy sound. The entrance to the building was made from extravagant imported Canadian marble, but still seemed somewhat artificial. Stepping inside, Nakajima took a deep breath and straightened up.

Nakajima entered the elevator and pressed the button to the thirteenth floor. With the change in air pressure, his body started to hurt, reminding him of the unpleasant events of the afternoon. A copper plaque with the word "NAKAJIMA" engraved on it was affixed to the door to apartment 1302. Nakajima pressed the doorbell, but there was no response. Sighing, he unlocked the door.

Opening the door and going inside, Nakajima took off his shoes, threw them aside randomly, and headed to the bathroom. The injured lip of the face looking back at him in the mirror had swollen up like a balloon, and was quite unpleasant to look at. His left cheek had a yellowish bruise on it as well. After looking at himself in the mirror for a bit, Nakajima abruptly turned on the faucet and splashed his face with the water that came pouring out. Returning to the living room and collapsing on the sofa, he noticed a memo on the side table.

"I'm going to be late at a meeting. Heat up your dinner in the microwave...."

Nakajima crumpled up the note without reading it to the end.

"If you're just going to write the same old excuse, you might as well just photocopy the thing..."

After Nakajima's father was transferred to the branch office in Los Angeles, his mother had become more and more involved in her job as a designer. Sometimes she wouldn't get home until the middle of the night. Picturing his mother's face, Nakajima's smoldering anger suddenly flared up. Right at that moment, the telephone rang. Of course, it was probably for his mother. Glaring at the ringing phone, Nakajima opened the door to his room.

Nakajima's room was quite dreary, without a single poster or decoration. With the exception of the one with the window, the walls were filled with large steel bookshelves that stretched to the ceiling. The bookshelves had anime magazines and comic books, much like

one would expect to find in a high school student's room, but one corner seemed starkly out of place. That shelf was filled with books on magic and sorcery with titles like "The Book of the Dead" and "Pnakotic Manuscripts." On top of his steel desk sat a fully decked-out computer, and sitting next to it was a general-purpose book on magic called "The New Golden Dawn Theory." From the look of the wear on the leather cover, it was clear that the book had seen a lot use.

Nakajima pulled his chair out from the desk and sat down in front of the display. Turning on the switch on the side of his speakers, the vocals of David Coverdale filled the room. Nakajima's fingers started flying over the keyboard.

> LIST

Entering the command, a very long program scrolled down the screen. Following the program list with sharp eyes, Nakajima started tapping the keys with a flowing rythm.

Nakajima first became interested in magic when he had the opportunity to read "The New Golden Dawn Theory." While the book was poorly written, and the interpretation therein was clumsy and unskillful, Nakajima read through the whole thing regardless; while the world of magic held an appeal that hid a dark and sinister side, it also showed a rational and scientific realism to it as well. While re-reading passages that seemed to unusual to him two or three times over, Nakajima had made a sudden realization that was almost like an epiphany.

Magical theory and computer theory were surprisingly similar.

At first glance, the two worlds did not seem to have any connection to each other. However, the similiarities between them had been discovered by both magic and information technology researchers long before Nakajima. Charles Feed, a professor at MIT, a school famous for its study of artificial intelligence, was one of those researchers. Nakajima had immediately become a member of his group, ISG. (International Satanist Garden) And for the past few months, Nakajima had been immersed in writing a program to summon demons, the idea for which he had thought up himslf.

It was almost complete.

Nakajima had already finished the core part of the program. All he had to do now was add a few subroutines and it would be finished. But until yesterday, Nakajima had had reservations about finishing the project to completion. If his theory was correct, the program would definitely call a demon into the world. But up until this point, Nakajima couldn't think of any particular reason to summon a demon; he wouldn't even know what to make it do. But the events of the day had given him a clear, simple, goal.

"I feel a little sorry for you, but you're going to be the subject of a little experiment." Nakajima started creating his final subroutines.

"Use data addresses 3780-3990 for 'Toad's Legs.' Put this in the buffer, and before displaying the result, chant the spell. Yod, Dur, Dawr, Set. Wonder what this spell means?"

Picking up the modem receiver, Nakajima called Arkham in Massachusetts, to connect with

ISG's host computer. As the connection picked up, his computer's display filled with the image of the demon Lucifer. Calling up the AI, Craft, and explaining the situation, he asked about the spell. Nakajima's English was not particularly good, so several times the only thing that appeared on-screen were question marks.

> OK, I UNDERSTAND.

Finally, Craft appeared to have gotten it; Nakajima asked the AI what the spell meant.

> PERHAPS IT'S ONLY A COUNTER?

Craft's response probably indicated that the spell was only a time counter.

> THANK YOU, CRAFT.

Cutting the connection to ISG, Nakajima set himself to the task of writing the subroutine once again. Two hours later, there was a knock on his door.

"Come on in." With a hint of irritation in his voice, Nakajima responded to the knock without taking his eyes off the program list on-screen.

"Did you eat dinner?"

"...."

Nakajima didn't respond, and just kept typing on the keyboard.

"Oh, what happened to your lip?" Nakajima's mother bent down from behind him to take a good look at his face.

"I ran into the goalpost playing soccer." Nakajima stopped typing and looked back at his mother. Nakajima had a strong resemblance to his mother, who was a beautiful woman with a slender face. When they were together, they would frequently be mistaken for siblings. When it came to her son's education, she was very conservative; she wanted him to get into Keio University's medical school. Of course, there were too many blemishes on his academic record for that to ever happen.

"Shouldn't you put some medicine on it?"

"It's OK, mom. It's not serious."

Irritated at his programming being interrupted, Nakajima absentmindedly tapped keys at random on the keyboard.

BEEP.

The computer made a harsh tone, and an error message appeared on-screen. As if realizing that her son wasn't going to pay her any heed, Nakajima's mother left the room as if giving up.

That night, at 3AM.

"All right, it's done!"

Nakajima slapped his thighs with his hands and stood up from his chair.

> RUN

The disk drive started whining, and bizarre letters blinked on and off the screen. But in less

than five minutes, the screen displayed an error message and stopped.

> OUT OF MEMORY

If there wasn't enough memory for the program, it was probably either because the program itself was too long, or because it dealt with more variables than the machine could handle.

"No big deal. One little computer isn't enough to run a program like this anyway. If I use the school's host computer, it should have more than enough memory."

Nakajima's eyes glittered with anticipation.

Chapter 3

Later that week, at 7PM on Saturday, Professor Iida, who was on night watch, noticed that there was someone in the CAI room and opened the door.

"Who's here at a time like this?"

At the sound of his voice, a student looked up from one of the CAI terminals, his face glowing strangely in the reflected light of the display.

Iida's expression softened. "Oh, it's just you, Nakajima. What are you doing in here with all the lights off?"

Nakajima's academic record was far from perfect, but his genius had endeared him somewhat to the math and science teachers and earned their trust.

"My program's just not working out the way I wanted to. But I'm almost done fixing it." Nakajima's voice seemed slightly metallic, as if in tune with the sound of the disk drive spinning.

"I'm always happy to see your enthusiasm, but you know that you need to ask permission in advance if you want to work in this classroom late at night. You're lucky that it was me that found you instead of someone else." Scolding Nakajima, Iida flicked on the light switch.

"What is this!?" Iida's shocked voice echoed through the now-lit CAI room. A large geometric figure was drawn on the floor in white and red chalk, with Nakajima's seat situated at the center.

"It's a Solomon Hexagram."

"Solomon? That has an occultish sound to it." Nakajima paid Iida's sarcasm no heed, and his fingers slid over the keys of the terminal. Presently the host computer located in the adjacent machine room sealed off by thick glass walls started to run.

"Great, the bugs are finally gone. It's done!" After sending a print job to print out the contents of the program list, Nakajima stood and turned toward Iida. His girlish, almond eyes glittered in a demonic grin. The wound in his lip that he had gotten when Kondo beat him up had since sealed, but the excitement had reopened the cut, and a trickle of fresh blood stained his jaw.

Iida's gaze became stern. "All right, Nakajima, do you want to explain just what kind of program you're running on the host computer--and without permission, I might add?"

Nakajima brushed aside some hair from his forehead and responded nonchalantly. "I've written a program that will summon demons. This hexagram is here to protect me from them. In just a moment a demon will appear. Professor, you should probably enter inside it too. You might get shredded to pieces otherwise."

For an instant, Iida's mouth gaped open, and he took a long hard look at Nakajima.

"Have you lost it?"

"Is it me who's lost it, or the school? Professor, take a good look at me. This wound on my lip,

the bruise on my face. I got the crap beaten out of me by Kondo from the karate club. Takamizawa Kyoko is just as guilty. The school just lets wild animals like that run free, and doesn't do anything to deal with them at all. No matter what happens to me in the classroom, the teachers and students just pretend it didn't happen. The violence that happens in this school is as plain as day, and yet nobody gets punished. I suppose the teachers are just waiting for students like that to graduate. As long as they keep their eyes shut, the calamity will just clear itself up on its own; they just have to endure it for two or three years. But this is the only time I get to be a high school student. I'm not going to let them just do whatever the hell they want any more. I'm going to summon a demon and execute those annoying insects." Nakajima's speech seemed excited and his shoulders rose and fell in time with his wild breathing.

Nakajima turned away from the stunned Iida and to the keyboard.

> RUN

With the final command displayed on the monitor, the magnetic tape of the host computer started to gradually spin. Iida tried to yell at Nakajima and stop the computer. But the moment he opened his lips, a frigid breeze from nowhere struck him and covered his arms in goosebumps.

"Summoning demons with a computer...what a concept!" Iida twisted his lips into a smile to hide his fear.

"Computer theory and magical thought have many overlapping similarities. I bet the first person who thought up the principles of computing was an alchemist or Kabbalist. It's not that well-known, but things like spells, sacrifices, and thaumaturgic circles are very easy to put into binary format. Summoning a demon is just a transfer of the matter comprising the demon in the Atziluth World to the real Assiah World, and a computer is the perfect device to facilitate it."

While Nakajima was explaining his theory, the cold air wrapped around Iida almost like a living creature, and a bizarre smell entered his nostrils. The lights of the classroom flickered out, and the CAI room plunged into darkness, the only sound that of the spinning disk drive. Presently the computer let out a low whine.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh." To Iida's ears, the whine sounded like actual, real words.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh." While whispering in sync with the computer, Nakajima continued to enter commands on the keyboard with unbelievable speed. Soon the entire room started to shake like an earthquake, and cracks formed in the windows. At the same time, Nakajima entered his final command.

> KILL! KONDO HIROYUKI, TAKAMIZAWA KYOKO

Iida did not like students like Kondo Hiroyuki and Takamizawa Kyoko. In fact, he hated them. But he felt even more repulsed by the manner in which Nakajima intended to deal with them.

"Stop this foolishness. If you'd like, I can make sure the incident is investigated fully and have Kondo expelled. Just stop doing this."

While stumbling in the shaking room, Iida desperately reached for the computer's power switch. To prevent him from interfering, Nakajima grabbed his arm with a strength one wouldn't even imagine him displaying normally. However, while the two struggled, the rumbling started to subside. The fluorescent lights lit up with a creaking sound and filled the room with light, and the freezing air about Iida's body dissipated.

"Where did you go!? Why won't you show yourself? Demon, are you going to abandon me?" Crying out, Nakajima headed toward the keyboard.

> KILL! KILL!

But the host computer's magnetic tape slowly and mercilessly started spinning to a halt. Anxiously opening the program list, Nakajima scanned the details of the program with bloodshot eyes and aimlessly stood as if sapped of all his vitality.

"My program was perfect. There wasn't a single bug in it. So why did the demon vanish before showing itself? It should have appeared right over there!" Leaving the program list open, Nakajima stumbled out of the CAI room as if in a trance. Staring dumbfoundedly at Nakajima's back as he left, Iida finally came to his senses and turned off the power to the computer.

"I guess it's true how they say that there's a fine line between genius and insanity. That was one hell of an earthquake though." Iida whispered as if trying to purge his memory of the repulsive experience.

Chapter 4

The next week, Iida was teaching Nakajima Akemi and Takamizawa Kyoko's class math in the CAI Room. Perhaps it was because he was there to witness the failure of the demon summoning, but Nakajima was looking at Iida with a defiant stare. Until now, he would never have acted like this. Trying hard to ignore him, Iida continued his lesson.

"Now I'm going to have you take an interactive test using the host computer. However, this test won't affect your grades in any way. Through your interaction with the computer, I'd like you to get a little bit more familiar with any weak points you may have. Begin entering your commands as soon as I give the signal."

The students all affixed their eyes to their screens and silently started answering the questions given them, as the host computer started diligently recording their individual responses.

Once use of CAI spreads, things will get a lot easier for us teachers. Though if it becomes too widespread, the time may come that we teachers aren't needed any more... Iida carefully watched over his class while relaxing a bit.

All of a sudden, as if coming from the depths of the earth itself, a low, rumbling voice sounded and shook the CAI room.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh."

The magnetic tape of the host computer started spinning wildly and the screens of the computers in the room started changing rapidly. Eerie colors and strange images flashed onscreen, and strange letter-like symbols appeared and disappeared. The students said nothing, but remained transfixed to their screens as if entranced.

"Nakajima, this is your doing, isn't it? Come on now, there's nothing wrong with a little mischief once in a while, but there are limits!" Twisting his face into a dark scowl, Iida started to walk over to Nakajima's seat, but the moment he started walking a student in the first row stuck his leg out into the aisle, tripping the teacher and causing him to clumsily fall forward. As Iida tried to get up, two more students slammed into his back, pinning him to the ground and twisting his arms behind him.

"Wh-what are you doing!? Stop this at once!" Taken aback at the sudden hostility of his students, Iida struggled to lift his head up while crying out. The other students, staring ahead with glazed looks as if in a trance, stood up from their seats. Three male students left the classroom, and the others gradually started to surround Takamizawa Kyoko.

Her face drained of color, Kyoko stared dumbfoundedly at her classmates surrounding her. Her catlike eyes were full of fear, her lips trembling up and down but held shut as if sewn together. A male student with thick glasses touched her chest, and as if freed from a curse, Kyoko lept up onto the desk.

"Stay away from me, asshole!" Kyoko yelled out desperately, whipping out a razor blade

held between her thumb and middle finger.

"Stop, Takamizwa. Run!" Iida's shaking voice echoed throughout the classroom. But Kyoko merely took a sidelong glance at her restrained teacher, spat, and swung her razor at the student that had touched her. The student's glasses flew off, and his split cheek started oozing fresh blood. But the student did not falter a bit or even try to wipe off the blood, but obstinantly grabbed onto Kyoko's left ankle.

"Let go of me, asshole!" The razor slashed open the student's temple, and then lodged into his blood-soaked arm, breaking in two. Taking advantage of Kyoko's surprise, another student grabbed her left angle, and the two students now gripping both her legs raised their arms, hoisting her up in the air and dangling her upside-down. Her skirt fell down around her waist, revealing her white legs. Kano Miyuki, one of the most beautiful girls in the school along with Kyoko, walked up, put her face in between Kyoko's legs, and bit into her inner thigh. Bending backward in pain, Kyoko attempted to fight back, flailing her arms around like an animal caught in a trap, her drooping hair swishing wildly around, but several students knelt down by her head and started to twist her neck around.

"Stop! Stop this!"

As Iida cried out with tears in his eyes, a cold voice spoke.

"Professor, it's too late." Nakajima, who had been at his computer entering commands the whole time, looked at Iida with a sarcastic smile on his face.

"Ooh..."

With a meager cry, Kyoko's legs spasmed two or three times. Without even attempting to wipe the blood from her face, Miyuki looked up and the two students holding Kyoko in the air let go of her legs. As Kyoko's twisted, lifeless body dropped to the floor, the circle of students started to break up, leaving her behind.

Right about that time, the door opened, and the three students that had left earlier entered the room, Kondo following behind them. After hearing that Kyoko was being ganged up on and verbally harassed by her classmates, Kondo came with a mind to teach the "know-it-alls" of the gifted class a lesson. However, the classroom was completely silent, and not at all what he was expecting. The three students led the perplexed Kondo to the center of the room, then quickly moved away.

"Oh my god..."

Seeing Kyoko's corpse, Kondo was dumbfounded and words escaped him for a moment. The students in the classroom surrounded him, as if to cut off his path of retreat. At that point, Kondo probably could have gotten away had he set his mind to it. But with his mind clouded with shock and anger, Kondo didn't realize just how dangerous a position he had walked into.

"You bastards, what have you done...who killed Kyoko!?"

His body shuddering in rage, Kondo's furious, bloodshot eyes turned to the students. But

the normally meek students, who would usually run away if Kondo merely looked at them, showed no signs of fear, and returned his harsh gaze.

There was something seriously strange going on here.

At that moment, a groan sounded. Looking in the direction of the voice, Kondo saw Nakajima standing over Iida with his foot pinning the teacher's head to the ground.

"Nakajima...?"

Not evenning imagining for a moment that such a genius pretty-boy could be capable of something like this, Kondo was completely taken aback.

Iida called out to him from the back of his throat. "Kondo, run! Everyone's gone mad!"

Called back to his senses by the teacher's voice, Kondo howled like a wild animal and charged Nakajima. But right before he reached Nakajima, a dozen students jumped on him and pulled him to the ground. Struggling with all his might, Kondo knocked off the students clinging to them, punching and kicking any that got close. But even with their foreheads split and their ribs shattered, the students picked themselves off the floor as if they felt no pain at all, and fiercely grabbed onto Kondo. One of them picked up a computer monitor and hit him hard in the back of the head with it. Kondo's vision blurred with the shock of the blow and started to stumble, and in that instant, the students pulled him to the floor again and restrained his limbs.

"Shit, let me go! I'll kill you!!"

Looking at Kondo vainly struggling against the students, trying to get free, Nakajima's handsome face twisted into a cold smile.

"Actually, you're the only one who's going to be killed here. I was hoping to have Kyoko be your executioner, but as you've seen, she's already died. So I've been nice enough to have Miyuki do the job for her; you should thank me."

Cradling his chin in his hand as if in thought, Miyuki kneeled down near Kondo and brought her face close to his, her chin still covered in Kyoko's blood. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. Kondo's body stiffened up and shivered a bit, and in that instant, the knife in Miyuki's hand flashed and was drenched in crimson. A gurgling cry came out of Kondo's severed windpipe, and with his eyes still open, his head folded backward with a sickening crunch.

"Now then, Professor." Nakajima crouched down and looked into Iida's face.

"What do you think, Professor? You see? My demon summoning experiment wasn't a failure. That day, a demon really did appear--inside the CAI host computer. We just didn't realize it. When I was in class here in the CAI room yesterday, the demon sent me a message: 'KILL! I UNDERSTOOD' He can't escape from the computer, so he used group hypnosis to control the class. By the way, Professor, I promised to give three souls to the demon. Kyoko's, Kondo's, and one other..."

For an instant, Nakajima's eyes glittered with an emotion like pity. But as if to suppress it,

he pressed his lips together and stood up.

"W-wait, please wait..." As Iida desperately wheezed and struggled, ten students dragged their feet along the floor, slowly approaching him.

Part 1: Night of Demons

Chapter 1

After many days of rain, the sun finally showed its face one June morning. The muddy water collected in puddles on the street reflected its rays like little mirrors. Shirasagi Yumiko narrowed her eyes a little bit and gazed at the three-story school building, which shimmered a bit like a mirage, wrapped in the haze created by the vapor from the evaporating water on the ground.

Shirasagi Yumiko.

Her long, slender limbs made her image seem appropriate to her name, which meant "White Heron." Her inquisitive red-brown eyes--which reflected her keen intellect--and her well-shaped nose gave her all the qualities of a natural beauty. However, it could be argued that her propensity for mischief kept her from being as mature as an ordinary high school senior.

Yumiko's transfer to this school had been quite sudden. Only two months earlier, her father, who had worked for a major electronics firm, had been transferred from the branch office in Sapporo to the main office in Tokyo. As the daughter of a salaryman, Yumiko had gotten used to frequent moves, but this was a bad time for a major change--next spring she would be taking her college entrance examinations. She had wanted to spend her last year of high school with the friends she had made, and it was hard to give that up. But after a lot of indecision and hard thought, the entire family had decided to move together, mostly on her mother's insistence that "it's too dangerous for either you or your father to live alone." But only two days after having transferred to Jusho High, Yumiko quickly started to regret giving in to her mother.

"I don't like the mood here."

Yumiko's admission test to the school had demonstrated that her abilities put her in the top tier of the "gifted" class. Her parents were quite relieved and happy at her scores, but Yumiko felt that this school had an unnatural coldness that she just could put her finger on. Her former school in Sapporo had also been quite a prestigious institution, but there was no sort of artificial separation between "gifted" and "general" classes, and the students there just seemed to be individually enjoying their life as high school students more.

In stark contrast, the students of Jusho High had the air of old hermits who had altogether given up on life. The gifted class simply went through the curriculum like machines, as if being programmed to pass their college entrance exams. Even though the general class had its share bright and talented students, many of them had lost their will because of the way that they were passed over by the administration, in favor of the students in the gifted class. Everyone knew their place in the organization, and nobody attempted to break that mold.

Come to think of it, she hadn't spoken a word yet, outside of her general introduction to the class. That alone was tough for Yumiko to stand, as she had never been the quiet type. However, she didn't feel any real hostility toward herself from the faculty or students. The entire class was eerily silent, as if being awkwardly suppressed by some sort of invisible force. During free periods, not a single one of Yumiko's classmates had said so much as a word to her.

"If you're too popular right from the beginning, people will start to keep an eye on you, and you don't want that!" That was what her mother had laughingly said when Yumiko mentioned the issue to her and joke or not, the comment had hurt her pride.

Inside the school courtyard, the opening bell rang.

Drawing in a deep breath and summoning her will together, Yumiko slowly walked toward the school building.

The first hour of the day was Classical Japanese class.

The professor, Ohara, was quite a beauty. She wasn't wearing much in the way of makeup, probably due to work regulations, but her tall height, style, and face--which looked attractive even to the eyes of other women--was such so that she could probably easily make it as a model. But the dull, toneless voice in which she read the text, combined with the monotonous translate-classical-to-colloquial manner in which she conducted the class could hardly be said to be attractive, even as insincere flattery. Yumiko had been desperately suppressing yawns all class long.

"In the *Ise Monogatari*, there is a *tanka* poem: 'In the Uzu Mountains of Suruga, I will not meet you in reality or in a dream.' In the past it has come up three times in Keio University's entrance exam, and also in Waseda University's exam, so you should memorize it..." Ignoring all cultural significance of the poem, Ohara started talking about entrance exams.

So much for romance and mystique of the Ise Monogatari. Ariwara Narihira must be rolling over in his grave.

Getting downright irritated by the class, and nearly on the brink of being overcome by drowsiness, Yumiko noticed a rythmical sound behind her, like that of a plastic sheet being tapped. Turning her head, she saw a handsome male student diagonally behind her to the right, typing on the keyboard of a handheld computer that sat atop his desk. She recalled his name as being Nakajima Akemi. Yumiko had been introduced to him along with all the other students the day before, but their names and faces had gotten all mixed up so she couldn't clearly remember everyone. But Nakajima's profile and name were both rather feminine, so his image had stuck in her head. Though he had completely ignored her when she had intially bowed her head in greeting.

Well, he's pretty obviously ignoring class. He's got guts! For some reason, Yumiko felt some affinity for this particular classmate.

It doesn't look like he's playing a game. Is he writing a program or something?

As if taking a break, Nakajima stretched his back and looked up slightly. His almond eyes looked around, and unexpectedly his gaze met Yumiko's.

After his successful test of the demon summoning program, it seemed as if Nakajima's nature had changed from the very roots. Or perhaps his true, formerly sealed-off demonic nature had been released and consumed the old Nakajima. Two months ago, his handsome face had only shown weakness, but now it emanated a powerful aura of pure ego. But what surprised Yumiko when their gaze met was not his powerful presence, but rather something else.

Deja vu.

I didn't realize it yesterday, but I think I've seen this guy somewhere before--like from a long time ago. Geez, I wonder why that is? A wave of emotion like awe coursed through Yumiko's body.

Despite Yumiko's staring at him, Nakajima displayed no interest in her and returned to typing on his keyboard rhythmically. As if staring into a deep ravine, Yumiko was struck with a strange sense of loss.

"Ms. Shirasagi, what are you looking at?" Ohara's somewhat irritated voice pulled Yumiko back to reality. Looking up, she noticed the *tanka* poem written on the blackboard in white chalk had been annotated with red and yellow markings.

"What does the 'utsutsu' in this *tanka* indicate? Explain." Yumiko felt the gaze of all the students in the class fall on her, as if testing her. The dull sound of Nakajima typing monotonously--and flagrantly--on the keyboard was the only sound in the room.

"Yes, ma'am. It indicates the name of the place, Uzu, and the meaning of the word 'utsutsu' itself, which is 'reality.'" Yumiko's voice sounded slightly nervous. But Ohara's question was an extremely easy one, especially for someone like Yumiko, who was aiming to be a literary historian.

"I see you've studied well, Ms. Shirasagi. But sometimes what I'm saying will come in handy too." Ohara's expression softened a bit with her sarcastic warning. The momentary tension in the classroom dispersed, and as if being pulled in by Ohara's smile, the male students all grinned. Yumiko got the sense that the entire class was mocking her.

The class bell rang.

"Excuse me, professor." Nakajima called out to the teacher, stopping her just as she was about to leave. Ohara turned around, her eyes clearly full of apprehension.

Yumiko the unusual relationship between the two.

The professor is afraid of Nakajima?

"Professor, you're coming tonight like we planned, right?" Nakajima stayed seated at his desk, idly playing with the keys on his handheld computer.

Ohara's face seemed to turn slightly red.

"OK. I'll see you in the CAI room..." she replied delicately. Nakajima smiled, nodded, and waved to her.

Gaping at the two in surprise, Nakajima's behavior seemed to Yumiko as if he was saying "Good girl, now go away." But this strange relationship between professor and student didn't seem to bother her classmates in the least, who indifferently prepared for their next class.

Overcome with curiosity, Yumiko waited for Ohara to leave the classroom and walked over to Nakajima's desk.

"Hey, Nakajima..." Yumiko spoke to him, not really sure of what she was going to say.

Nakajima looked up at her dubiously. Being watched by those eyes full of a strange devilishness, Yumiko was struck once again by a strange sense of déjà vu.

I can't shake the feeling I've met you somewhere before. Why? While that was what Yumiko really wanted to ask, that kind of question would probably just confuse him. Yumiko struggled to try and figure out what to do with this new, strange sensation.

"You know..." Nakajima opened his mouth and spoke as if teasing a small child.

"I think you'd be better off staying away from me."

"No, I..." With that response, Yumiko was unprepared with what to say next. At a seat further back, a stern and tough-looking male student's expression and hand movements signaled to Yumiko that she should probably leave Nakajima alone.

The classroom bell rang. The physics teacher for the second hour of class had at some point entered the room and was already standing at the head of the class.

You can go ahead and ignore me if you want. I want to know what's up with you, and it's my right to try and find out. Returning to her seat and enduring the thoughts and feelings welling up from the depths of her soul, Yumiko bit down on her lower lip with her well-shaped front teeth.

Chapter 2

Later that day at 7PM, Yumiko stood concealed in the shadows of the schoolyard, watching the CAI room carefully. An uncomfortably warm breeze struck her, carrying with it swarms of irritating insects that refused to leave her alone. The full moon showed itself from a break in the clouds, and illuminating the gloomy, flat-roofed separate building that housed the CAI room.

I feel like an idiot--a high school senior playing detective! Yumiko smiled bitterly while carefully observing the silent, empty CAI room. Yumiko asked herself just why she was out here doing this.

Yumiko was pretty sure that Nakajima had said "tonight." It just wasn't normal for a student to call a female teacher to the CAI room in the middle of the night. Of course, it was probably none of her business what the two of them would be doing there. However, after seeing Ohara's nearly drunken gait as she left the classroom, Yumiko had been very upset, and was overwhelmed with the urge to find out what the relationship between the two were; thus she had been hiding here all afternoon long.

Is this love at first sight?

No, that was too hasty a conclusion to make.

Yeah, right...

Yumiko could not deny that Nakajima had a very unique appeal to him, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was drawn to him on some sort of deeper connection, on a level beyond an ephemeral "love or hate" sort of emotion.

The arms of the clock passed 9PM, and just as Yumiko's arms and legs were starting to fall asleep, the silhouette of a person passed through the connecting hallway and entered the CAI room. Yumiko's body stiffened in nervousness. Presently a light went on inside the CAI room, and through the glass of the window, the outlines of several people moving about the room were faintly visible. But before Yumiko's heart even had a chance to start racing, the shadow of a very large man approached the window, and in an instant, all the blinds were lowered. It would appear that Ohara and Nakajima were not the only people meeting tonight. The mystery only deepened, and Yumiko, overcome with curiosity, decided to move from the rear of the schoolyard to the CAI room to get a better look.

Right as Yumiko left her former watchpoint, Ohara stealthily approached the CAI room, opened the door slightly, and slipped inside. The room was lit up brilliantly, and three students arrived to greet her. The three of them were garbed in black robes; one of them reverently carried a silver platter, and the other two carried swords and candlesticks. The desk in the center of the room that normally sported several computers had been removed, and in its place was a leather sofa. Nakajima Akemi was sitting on that sofa, deep in

meditation. A large circle divided into twelve sections like a horoscope was drawn on the floor, with the sofa situated in the center; at four places inside the circle were astrological symbols representing the Moon, Sun, Mars, and Pluto.

"Hello, and welcome." Realizing Ohara's arrival, Nakajima stopped his meditation and slowly stood up; as he left the sofa, the several belts attached to it on the backrest, arms and base--belts expressly designed to bind a person down--became clearly visible. However, even seeing this, Ohara displayed no signs of fear, and in fact her expression even calmed a bit. Smiling and nodding, Nakajima ordered the three students to turn out the room lights and ignite the candles. They obediently followed his orders. As if enthralled by the mysterious aura the now-dark room seemed to hold, Ohara knelt on the ground in front of Nakajima.

Nakajima's white, translucent hand touched Ohara's flushed cheek.

"Come, relax a bit. In just a few minutes, the demon Loki will arrive. Loki is well known for his beauty and mischievousness; a perfect match for you, Professor..." Nakajima spoke in a voice that had a composed, sweet sound, one that could melt the heart of any person. As Nakajima's hand slid from Ohara's cheek to the nape of her neck, her breath became deep and heavy.

"It's time to turn on the host computer. There's no need to worry, Professor. I'm sure that you will satisfy the demon..." Whispering in Ohara's ear, Nakajima stepped away and entered a command into a nearby terminal. Beyond the thick plate glass, the reels of magnetic tape slowly started to turn. Nakajima picked up his handheld computer and entered a quick command. A white haze appeared from the liquid crystal display and began expanding before seeping out the doorway; as soon as it disappeared from view, the low growl of a beast sounded throughout the outside hallway, enough to send tremors of fear into the bowels of all within earshot. It was Kerberos, a digital beast summoned from the Atziluth world and given form by Nakajima; he was to perform the role of guardian for tonight's ceremony.

Meanwhile, the three students in the room led Ohara to the sofa, and fastened her firmly to the seat using the leather belts.

"Come, steady your breathing. Concentrate your spirit, and call forth the demon from the Atziluth world."

Click, Click.

As if impatient, the sound of the terminal's disk drive echoed throughout the room.

"The Moon and Mars are opposite each other, and so are the Sun and Pluto, forming the Grand Cross in the heavens. No night could be as perfect as this to summon a demon." Speaking as if chanting a spell, Nakajima took a helmet-like device from the machine room and placed it on Ohara's head.

It was a brainwave Modem Helmet. It digitized human brainwaves, and acted as an interface to directly communicate with the computer. Two long cables extended from the back

of the helmet by the base of the head, one red and one black. The red cable connected to the host computer, and the black one connected to one of the terminals in the room. Nakajima entered a command on the terminal, and the magnetic tapes started to spin rapidly. Ohara's body started twitching slightly, as if her consciousness was already blending into someone inside the host. A pungent musky spell wafted up from somewhere, enveloping her. The faces of the three students watching over the ceremony with glazed-over, unfocused eyes, lit up with an expression like awe.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh." The instant the low, rumbling voice sounded from the machine room, Ohara let out a cry and started twisting her body about. As she continued to scream intermittently, her eyes opened wide with fear, staring emptily into space. The legs of the sofa started to come off the floor as Ohara twisted her limbs as if trying to escape from something, stretching the cables connected to her helmet.

The leather straps binding her ground against her wrists, breaking the skin and staining the belts black with oozing blood. But the expression of panic on Ohara's face soon dissipated, her face became calm, and she closed her eyes. Her mouth turned up at the corners into a smile, even though her bottom lip was still bleeding from where she had bitten down on it.

"I see you've succeeded in taking in Ohara, Loki. Now, what are you going to do with her?" Nakajima looked into the display of the computer connected to the modem helmet.

The digital modem helmet had taken Ohara's thoughts and sensations, digitized them, and sent them into the world that virtual Loki had created in the host computer. One could say that her earlier pain had just been a temporary autonomous rejection reaction when her digitized nervous system initially came into contact with that of the demon.

Nakajima looked into the display of the computer, hoping to get a glimpse of the world that was currently being fed into Ohara's visual cortex. All of a sudden, Kerberos' angry roar echoed throughout the corridor outside. In reaction to Nakajima's gesture, the two stern students carrying swords started moving toward the door.

Shortly after Ohara had entered the CAI room, Yumiko moved from the rear of the schoolyard to the hallway that connected the outlying building with the rest of the school. She slowly walked along the corridor, using the reflected moonlight off the linoleum floor as a guide. From a crack in the blinds by the darkened window, a slight flickering light was visible, most likely from candlelight.

Stop this foolishness. Let's just go home, take a shower, and forget all this. Yumiko's normal instincts anxiously tried to persuade her. But tonight, there was another Yumiko pulling the strings.

What are you so afraid of? This is our chance to find out what's up with Nakajima! Like all other girls her age had done at least once or twice, Yumiko obeyed her more daring, curious voice. From the CAI room, she could hear the sound of a far-off cry, like sobbing. The instant

Yumiko's heart started racing, something suddenly crawled out of the darkness right in front of her, before she had a chance to even react.

The moon broke through the clouds, illuminating the form of a terrible beast. Its body was larger than even a lion, and its huge mouth--which practically looked like it took up half its body--had two rows of long, sharp fangs. Its eyes glared at Yumiko, shining like a flame, and the metallic feelers growing out of its head near the ears moved around as if trying not to let a single tiny change in the area escape them. Its burly shoulders and thick body were striped like a tiger, and its heavy-looking tail was plated with snakelike scales.

It was the digital beast, Kerberos. Breathing out a puff of air that had the stench of bloody meat on the petrified Yumiko, the beast roared. Yumiko's stomach twisted so powerfully that she felt almost as if her intestines were being gouged out, and her vision blurred. Unable to withstand the shock, she passed out.

Yumiko was brought to her senses by the sensation of an unusual heat, and the sound of intermittent panting. The surrounding area was dim and gloomy, and the only thing she felt was one of her cheeks pressed to the cool ground.

Oh, right! That monster...!

As Yumiko sat upright, Ohara, bound to a leather chair, entered her field of vision. She was wearing a strange helmet and breathing heavily. Next to her, Nakajima was staring at a computer display, an eerily cold smile on his handsome face.

"Nakajima..." As Yumiko blurted out her surprise, someone grabbed her right shoulder. Yumiko gulped back her words as she looked around.

Standing behind her was Takai Ken'ichi. Normally Takai was weak-willed and reasonable, but now he looked at her with a hollow stare as if almost possessed by something, and Yumiko certainly didn't think he knew where he was or could even recognize her. Furthermore, there were two other students garbed in black robes in the room, standing still with a look like sleepwalkers.

At that moment, Ohara's heavy breathing got stronger. Furiously panting and writhing her body around, she was giving off a ghastly aura that seemed as if it would pollute the soul of anyone that came close to her.

Yumiko cried out. "What is this!? What have you done to the teacher?"

Takai tried to force Yumiko to the ground, but Nakajima slowly raised his hand to stop him. At his signal, Takai's strong hand stiffly moved away from Yumiko's shoulder.

"You're....Shirasagi Yumiko, was it? Come and have a look at this. It's fascinating."

As Yumiko stood up, she noticed that part of her skirt was torn, as if a dog had bitten it. At that moment, she realized that the beast she had seen earlier was all too real.

Nakajima pointed to the screen of the terminal connected to Ohara's helmet by a cable. There onscreen was a magnificent bronze statue of a youth, like an ancient Greek sculpture.

No, it couldn't be a sculpture. The divinely beautiful image was calmly moving, as if life had been breathed into it. The image zoomed in to a view of the youth's head and chest. His expression displayed an intellect beyond anything a human could hope to have, and his jet black eyes looked almost like two black holes that would absorb everything they gazed on.

"That's the demon Loki." Nakajima spoke into Yumiko's ear.

"This is just CG, isn't it?" Yumiko's eyes remained glued to the screen.

"If I could think up a demon this realistic and draw it, I wouldn't have to go to school in the first place. No, this is a real demon. Though I imagine you won't believe that."

Loki flexed his muscular chest onscreen. It was shining black, and covered with scales. At that moment, Yumiko noticed that Ohara's gasps were in perfect sync with Loki's movements. The next instant, she realized what that meant and gasped.

"That's right. Professor Ohara and Loki are having a little fun together right now. In the virtual world, that is." For some reason Nakajima spat out the words as if slightly upset.

Ohara was getting closer and closer to orgasm. Her heaving chest, covered in sweat, was visible through her open blouse. Her body had entirely accepted the invisible demon in the virtual world. At that moment, Yumiko noticed a faint blue haze floating about the area of Ohara's chest. Furthermore, that haze was increasing in thickness, and an unbearable stench assaulted her nostrils. Looking confused, Nakajima knelt in front of Ohara with his handheld computer in one hand, typing on the keyboard while waving a sensor rod around the area. As Ohara cried out and lost consciousness, the blue haze dissipated.

Nakajima let out a deep sigh of relief. In his expression, Yumiko sensed a faltering of his normally rock-solid confidence.

Nakajima was not a magician. Had he been one, he would surely have known how important it was to iron out a purpose and duration of service when negotiating a contract with a demon.

However, Nakajima had neglected that. When Loki turned Kondo, Takamizawa and Iida into bloody lumps of flesh, he had been deluded into believing that he had become a great ruler of some sort.

Loki's power was tremendous. Taking the subconscious respect that the students and teachers had for Nakajima and nurturing it with his power, he made the men obey him and the women fawn over him. For a formerly powerless high school student, it was a dream come true.

Loki demanded female sacrifices. Those offered to him would groan, contort, and eventually reach orgasm. Perhaps deep in his subconscious, Nakajima took a sadistic glee in violating women. But he had always thought that what went on was not for real, as it only took place in a virtual world.

Loki could not escape from the computer. Unless one used the world's most powerful

computer, the immense amount of data that would be needed to give him form would be far too much to process. He could only act within the confines of the software that Nakajima had written. So what was that blue haze that had shrouded Ohara....?

"Nakajima, you're afraid of something, aren't you?" A woman's voice sounded.

Nakajima remembered that he had been talking to Yumiko about what he was doing.

What was I thinking? I shouldn't have told her all of all that. Affixing his gaze on Yumiko, Nakajima looked straight forward. For an instant, it looked like Yumiko's eyes glowed scarlet, and Nakajima was engulfed in darkness. An unfamiliar, illusory world opened up before him.

Several reddish-brown rocky mountains towered above toward the heavens, not even a blade of grass sprouting from them. As if threaded between the treacherous mountains, a small pathway wriggled forward as far as one could see. A youth ran down the path desperately, clenching his teeth and exhaling breaths that felt like fire. He was dressed in a sleeveless flaxen robe, his long, chest-length hair tied in a ponytail behind him, and as his feet struck the dusty ground, the string of curved jewels around his neck shook. He was dressed as one might have in very ancient times.

However, the youth's face was definitely that of Nakajima Akemi. Beads of sweat ran down his cheek, wiping off the dust on it.

"My husband, why do you abandon me? Izanagi, why..." A sad voice full of misery reached the youth's ears. Reflexively, he slowed down. It seemed as if his head was trying to turn around on its own. But the youth bit down strongly on his lips, glade at the path ahead, and started running ahead. The woman behind him chased him as if dragging her feet, covered in blood from injuries sustained from the rough stone ground. Her long, graceful white arms extended forward as if futilely trying to gain ground on the youth. Her long black hair and desperate voice were both blown backward by the wind.

However, the face beneath that hair was rotted and melting, and her eye sockets were completely exposed. Maggots writhed in the space between flesh and bone, and when she gasped for breath, vile fleshy juices fell from her cheeks like tears. Her lips had rotted and fallen off, and as her exposed white teeth clenched together in frustration, she let out a shrill cry.

With the woman's cry, a bolt of purple lightning shot through the gloomy clouds in the sky, before coming down to strike at a nearby rocky mountain. A ghastly creature appeared from where the bolt struck. It was a huge woman that looked large enough to reach the clouds, with a slimy green hide and an appearance something like a frog. The woman stood in front of the path of the youth, extending both arms out as if to stop him.

"Yomotsu-Shikome, out of my way!" As the youth called out, the woman's squat neck jiggled like a blob of jelly, and she let out a hideous voice.

"STOP."

Seeing the youth continuing to press onwards, Yomotsu-Shikome took a step toward him. When her thick, misshapen leg struck the ground, the earth shook with a great sound. Not faltering for a moment, the youth glared at the giant form larger than a colossus in front of him, pulled a red comb from his hair, broke off one of its teeth, and threw it at the woman. The tooth of the comb lodged itself into Yomotsu-Shikome's exposed chest, and the woman's ugly face suddenly twisted into an expression of pain. As if her whole body was being affected by some strong poison, she gripped her chest in pain and vomited syrupy bile all over the ground. Even still, she tried to grab onto the youth, but her body convulsed furiously and she fell face-forward onto the ground, shaking the very earth itself.

As the youth delicately passed by the side of the huge corpse, the sound of the sad voice sounded in his ears once more.

"Please wait, Izanagi...."

"Nakajima, what's the matter!?" Suddenly brought back to his senses by the sound of someone calling his name, Nakajima saw Shirasagi Yumiko looking at his face closely with a perplexed look. Her eyes were full of both fear and pity.

What the hell just happened? Was that hallucination connected to the Demon Summoning Program in some way? Or else... For a moment, Nakajima was lost in Yumiko's eyes. But his excessively stubborn pride would not allow him to show Yumiko any more weakness.

"Forget it, just get out of here." Nakajima's words were curt and cold, as if he was trying to blow off the situation. Yumiko looked like she wanted to say something, but was unwilling to oppose him and thus obeyed.

"At any rate, I've got to figure out what that haze was." Recovering his composure, Nakajima turned on the modem and called up ISG's host computer.

HELLO NAKAJIMA, WHAT'S UP?

Checking the Craft AI's message, Nakajima changed disk drives and turned on another customized computer, an automatic translator equipped with a database of 50,000 magic and occult-related terms. Of course, Nakajima had created it himself.

> AN UNKNOWN VAPOR APPEARED ABOVE THE SACRIFICE. I'M SENDING A ROUGH ESTIMATION OF ITS FORM AND COMPOSITION. TRY TO ANALYZE IT FOR ME.

The data stored in the handheld computer traveled over the phone lines to Massachusetts. Nakajima tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk for a minute...two minutes. Five minutes later, Craft finally sent its analysis.

VOLUME AND MASS SUGGESTS AN ECTOPLASMIC CONTENT FIVE TIMES NORMAL. JUDGING FROM THE SITUATION IN WHICH IT AROSE, THE CHANCE OF THE VAPOR BEING LOKI HIMSELF IS QUITE HIGH.

> I HAVEN'T PREPARED ANY DATA THAT WOULD ALLOW LOKI TO TAKE A BODY.

BESIDES, THE CAI ROOM'S COMPUTER COULDN'T POSSIBLY UNDERTAKE A SIMULATION OF THAT SCALE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

FROM THE DATA THAT YOU PROVIDED, I CANNOT GIVE YOU AN EXACT ANSWER. THE ONLY THING I CAN SAY IS THAT THE DEMON YOU SUMMONED INTO THE COMPUTER IS LIKE A GENIUS-LEVEL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. ONE CANNOT DISCARD THE POSSIBILITY THAT HE HAS FIGURED A WAY TO TAKE FORM HIMSELF.

> THANK YOU, CRAFT.

Sending his closing message, Nakajima cut the connection.

I can't possibly believe that Loki could have figured out a way to take a body on his own. Still, I had better start working on some new technology that I can use to take complete control of him.

Thinking to himself, Nakajima walked over to the window and looked up at the black expanse above.

Part 2: Transfer

Chapter 1

It was midnight at Marunouchi, yon-cho-me. Buildings with darkened windows rose up against the skyline. Not a soul could be seen along the walks under rows of gingko trees, and the only presence was that of flitting moths attracted to the streetlights, shedding their tiny scales on the sidewalk below. The office district was so quiet that you could almost hear those moths bumping into the iron lampposts.

But the silence outside apparently made no difference to the big trading firms that held the weight of the economy on their shoulders; even now, there was still light coming from the twelfth floor of the Mitsune Productions building. The Third Export Division managed all trade with Europe. There were only two weeks left until August, when the EC Import Regulation Act would take effect. In a last-chance rush to get exports out, all the department's traders were being forced to work at full capacity around the clock.

Inevitably having gotten tired at this hour, some people were taking catnaps on the sofa, whereas others had gone out for a bite at the ramen shops near Tokyo station. Inoue narrowed his bloodshot eyes and inputted the next day's projected exports into the online system's workstation that connected him with the overseas export system. But with his metal-framed glasses covered in fingerprints, he didn't look nearly his normal stylish self.

"How much is left?" Hashiguchi, who had been napping on the sofa, propped himself up on his elbow and called over to Inoue. His voice clearly stifled a yawn.

"It shouldn't take too long--all that's left is the household electronics slated for shipment to France." Using his vinyl code sheet as a fan, Inoue blew air onto his chest through his V-neck T-shirt.

"So how much have the exports increased by?" Rubbing his swollen eyelids, Hashiguchi looked over Inoue's shoulder at the screen.

"200% more than last year, most likely. When I think that all this might get stopped at customs, it scares me."

"Some friction has to be expected. After all, in two weeks, we're going to take a 90% hit off of last year's exports."

"The *kacho* and the others are sure taking their time. How long does it take to eat a bowl of ramen? I bet they stopped for drinks afterwards."

"Why don't you have a rest. I'll take over with the data entry for a bit." Hashiguchi patted Inoue on the shoulder and smiled sympathetically.

"OK then, thanks." As Inoue stood up and stretched, the modem rang. The LED signalling data transfer from the national branch office lit up.

"What do they want at a time like this?" Hachiguchi said.

"Oh, I'm sure they just want some of our leftover stock. Of course with all our efforts focusing on exports right now, this isn't the time for that." Already getting ready for a rest, Inoue had no other excuse to make.

"No need to get upset at them...the poor guys at the branch office are still working at this godforsaken hour, just like us."

While soothing his coworker, Hashiguchi swiched over to the disk drive and turned the computer over into receive mode. The list of enumerations vanished, and the screen turned completely green. Normally at this point, the ID number of the person sending the transmission would be displayed onscreen. However, the display was changing many colors and displaying strange unknown symbols instead.

"What the heck is this?" Unusual letters scrolled down the screen, but the two of them had no way of knowing that it was ancient Hebrew. Presently the screen displayed an image of a standing statue of a man.

"I'd like to tell those guys at the branch office not to play stupid jokes in the middle of the night like this." Looking disinterestedly at the screen with a sidelong glance, Inoue lit a cigarette.

Perhaps it was because of the tobacco smoke, but the two men did not notice the musky smell that started seeping through the office. Still, even as a prank, this mysterious statue was pretty well-done CG. A body with the symmetry of an ancient Greek sculpture. Long, black hair. Vivid, rose-colored lips. And his deep black eyes had an unfathomable devilishness about them.

"Not that it makes any difference, but this is some pretty high-level CG here," said Hashiguchi.

"Is it CG? It looks almost like a photo." As Inoue looked closely at the display, the unpleasant smell of singed cigarette filter wafted through the air.

"Oh! Sorry 'bout that." While Inoue turned his attention to putting out his cigarette, the man drawn on the display smiled and pointed at Hashiguchi. His finger was tipped with a claw that looked almost like a bird of prey's talon. This was about the time where the concept of polygons first started becoming widely-known. Hashiguchi was enthralled by the graphics--graphics that would normally be impossible to display without the use of a massive supercomputer.

Right about that time, Hashiguchi noticed that the display looked like it was damp, as if covered in a layer of condensation. As he tried to wipe off the sreen with his hand, he felt something stick to his fingertips, and jumped back in surprise. Something slimy was stuck to his fingers, and as he shook them violently, a heavy-feeling, disgusting jelly-like substance fell to the floor with a splat.

"Ugh! What the hell is this!?" Turning around at Hashiguchi's cry, Inoue was hit with a wave of shock and stood still, dumbfounded. Beneath the skin of the pink protoplasm, a mesh

of green-colored veins spread out, and the whole blob pulsated like some sort of organ torn out of its host. The repulsive lump of flesh made a squishing sound as it started to approach the two men. Backing up, Inoue stumbled over a chair and sprayed the contents of his stomach all over the floor.

"Inoue! Get a hold of yourself!" Grabbing his coworker's arm to keep him up, Hashiguchi ran toward the door. As he turned, the gelatinous blob lashed out tentacles covered in a viscous sticky fluid like red jam, and in an instant grabbed onto the legs of both men.

"Shit!" Crying out, Hashiguchi grabbed files and the phone off his desk--any object within reach--and began throwing them at his attacker, and when it showed no fear, grabbed a chair, lifted it over his head, and brought it crashing down on top of the thing. However, the skin of the gelatinous blob simply pulled the steel chair into its body, where it was quickly dissolved right in front of Hashiguchi's eyes.

Thump, thump.

Hashiguchi could no longer tell whether the sound he heard was that of his own heart beating, or whether it was the sound of the lump of flesh pulsating. When he was brought back to his senses by a strange sensation emanating from his foot, Hashiguchi's entire right leg was surrounded by the pink lump of flesh. He tried to cry out, but terror had sealed his throat and he could not even speak.

Steadily, greedily, the pink blob started to pull Hashiguchi's body into its own. He felt no pain. Like sinking into warm mud, along with a boundless feeling of loss, there was only the sense of his impending death.

Help me... No longer able to speak, Hashiguchi clawed at the air as if trying to find something to grab onto as a last resort, and in that instant, the blob clamped down onto his torso with an incredible force.

The shock sent Hashiguchi's eyeballs flying out of their sockets, and in an instant his crushed ribs shredded his internal organs; the blood that came pouring out of his body was absorbed by the blob. Only Hashiguchi's skull protuded from the mound of flesh, and presently pink tentacles started flowing out of his open mouth and eye sockets.

Now the only person on the deserted floor of the building, Inoue could hardly believe that Hashiguchi's gruesome death was for real. His capacity for rational thought completely gone, he stabbed maddly at the tentacle grabbing his leg with a ballpoint pen, as if to try to tear it off, and at that moment he felt someone looking at him and returned to his senses.

At some point, the gelatinous lump had grown an eyeball. Sinister and full of malice, it stared at Inoue. The tentacle slowly crawled up his body from his leg to his chest.

Watching his body being sucked into the grotesque mass of protoplasm, something snapped inside Inoue. Overcome with a rush of madness, he let out a shriek of cackling laughter. Right at that time, the floor's elevator made a sound, opened, and his coworkers returned from their break.

"What's with those guys? What are they laughing at?"

"I bet they're slacking off on the job and watching TV." Not having any idea what was going on, the men looked at each other, unaware of the carnage that they were about to step into the middle of.

Chapter 2

At roughly this time, Nakajima was in the CAI room of Jusho High, facing the Host Computer which was connected via a modem to the outside, and trying to talk to Loki.

"So what's the story? Did the movement experiment work?"

"I suppose it would be best to say that it showed some results--at least to an extent." The low, rumbling voice that came out of the speakers shook Nakajima's very bowels. Nakajima did not know that Loki had already achieved the ability to take form on his own. He thought the "results to an extent" meant that Loki could exist inside another computer as an AI construct.

"So, I guess you have no choice but to recognize how good my technology is?"

"If that's what you want to think, go ahead. But let me just say that we're a long way from perfection."

"Well, that's to be expected. When trying to send that much information in a single burst, there's bound to be some data loss." Sweat glistened off of Nakajima's forehead where his microphone headset gripped his temples. Nakajima continued to talk with a calm and disinterested air, but his entire body, stiff with tension, belied a hint of uneasiness in a corner of his mind.

What will happen if Loki gains the ability to take form? Nakajima asked himself, ignorant of the true situation.

No, that's impossible. Just look, Loki is dutifully obeying me in these demon transfer theory tests.

Demon Transfer Theory.

Gaining the ability to move freely about the earth had been a dream of demons for aeons, not just Loki. Since ancient times, the areas in which a demon could appear on the earth had been extremely limited. Furthermore, once a demon had actually been summoned, it could only hold form within a radius of a few kilometers from the point it was called to. It could easily be said that this was the reason why Earth had gone for so long without seeing an demon invasion.

Nakajima had created a technology that turned what was once common knowledge in the demon world upside-down. This technology would digitize a demon and transfer it to other computers over communication lines. If perfected, it would completely remove the physical restrictions on demon movement on Earth.

Nakajima thought that his experiment had finally succeeded. He was naive in his line of thought. To start with, he was just an ordinary high school student who had never made contact with a demon at all before, yet here he was immediately jumping to deal with an incredibly powerful demon lord like Loki, which could very well lead to tragedy. Still, one could say that he was being prudent and showing forethought by realizing the danger that

Loki could pose, should he gain the ability to gain form.

I may end up having to summon another powerful demon from the Atziluth World that can counteract Loki.

Unable to suppress his growing uneasiness, Nakajima started pondering walking down an even more dangerous road when a voice suddenly surged out of the speakers.

"Give me Shirasagi Yumiko."

"What!?"

"Give me Shirasagi Yumiko."

"No. I can't do that." The instant he heard Yumiko's name, Nakajima cried out. Even he was surprised by his own reaction.

"Child, who do you think you're ordering here!?" Loki's voice displayed an anger he had never shown before. The machine let out a strange whine, and sparks flew from where the cables connected to it.

"All right, all right, calm down..." Nakajima folded to Loki's threat with no resistance at all. Angry at himself, Nakajima bit down on his lip, almost enough to produce blood, and an image of Yumiko's face hovered in his mind. Once again, he was pulled into an illusion.

The towering rocky mountains and azure skies were not visible to the youth. His narrow eyes were fixated grimly on the track ahead of him. His parched, earthen-colored lips were encrusted with red-and black dried blood. His feet were swollen and purple, with sharp shards of rock embedded in them. However, the sound of the gasps drawing close behind him made his injured feet speed up his pace even more.

"Izanagi, why won't you wait? Is it because I've become so hideous? You promised me when I entered Yomi that you would bring me back, no matter what happened to me! Was that a lie? I would never run from you, no matter what happened to you!"

"Forgive me..." As if trying to flee from his fear and guilt, the youth clenched his teeth and took off. But the woman's tenacity was slowly bridging the gap between them. The woman's tears, falling from eyes with their lids rotted off, dropped to the ground with her hair as she cried out.

"Izanagi..."

As she cried out, the hole in her cheek became larger and larger, until her white molars were fully exposed. Soon the path ended, and the youth could see a wide expanse of shadowy wetlands in front of him.

"I made it back to Toyoashihara..." His lips trembled with relief. Opening his arms wide, the youth took a deep breath of the humid air, pursed his lips forcefully, turned around, and sat down.

For a while, he stared at the form of the grotesque woman chasing him, then shook his head sadly and closed his eyes.

The youth started to meditate. When the woman had gotten within reach of a stone's throw, his body seemed to float slightly in midair for a moment, and then there was a huge undulation in the atmosphere. As if a huge invisible power had been released, the earth shook, and the fissure that appeared directly beneath the youth spread to the surrounding mountains, and countless rocks started to fall on the path. As the woman stopped, a giant boulder rolled in front of the path in front of her eyes, sealing it off.

"Izanagi! I will come to you! Even if it takes hundreds or thousands of years!" The sound of the woman's bitter cries rose from beyond the towering pile of earth.

"Forgive me, Izanami..." Plugging his ears with his hands, the youth staggered into the wetlands, the tall reeds rising even above his height.

As Nakajima snapped out of his trance, he left the CAI room in low spirits, and a few minutes later, as if waiting for him to leave a dark shadow slipped through the hallway and into the room. Two hands reached out of the inky blackness, searching for the power switch to a terminal, and soon the light of a display was illuminating fingers on the keyboard.

They were white, smooth fingers. Soon they stopped moving at the coercing sound of a low voice.

"OHARA." That was what the voice said.

"I'm showing you the list for the transport program Nakajima wrote. Can you operate it?"

"I think I can operate it, but not much more than that."

"That's fine. There's no more need for any changes to the technology. If I can move and take form on my own, I can conquer the Assiah world singlehandedly."

"Your will be done." The microphone picked up the excited whisper.

Part 3: Possession

When confronted with something too unbelievable, people have a tendency to subconsciously avoid thinking about it. Or else, they will attempt to rationalize what they saw as an attempt to relieve their anxiety.

Yumiko did the same sort of thing in regards to her experience with the demon summoning in the CAI room.

That evening, Nakajima had said he summoned a demon using the computer. But when she really thought about it, there was no real hard evidence that what she saw really was a demon. With enough skill manipulating computer graphics, such a scene could easily be staged. As for that demonic beast, Yumiko only saw it for an instant. It would probably be more natural to think that it just been a large dog that Nakajima had used as a guard, and Yumiko's fear and surprise deluded her into seeing it as some sort of horrific monster. Nakajima might be a genius-level computer nut, but the whole ceremony could have been nothing more than something him and his followers had cooked up together. Nakajima had probably just started some sort of occult or magic club.

As the days passed by uneventfully, this was how Yumiko started to think of the whole experience. Jusho High's "gifted" class was still not a place that she felt entirely comfortable at, but she was still able to make a few friends there that she could banter with like a normal girl her age.

Still, it was definitely the case that Nakajima seemed to hold some sort of special authority about the school. Lately he had been spending all of his time holed up in the CAI room, and rarely if ever showed his face in class. The only time he would show up was when other classes were using the CAI room, and even then he would ignore class, programming on his handheld computer instead.

No matter how you looked at it, there was something not right about the situation. But whenever Yumiko tried talking to her friends about Nakajima, they would just clam up and try to change the subject. However, it wasn't as if they disliked him. Their silence was more like a sense of fear and awe, as if they couldn't find the right words to use when talking about such a powerful persona.

Well, no big deal. Besides, it doesn't really affect me anyway...

Even though Yumiko could explain the situation away to herself in such a manner, she couldn't keep her heart from racing whenever she pictured his profile in her head.

It was a morning in July, close to the start of summer vacation.

Yumiko walked to school along the highway between Kuniritsu Station and Hitobashi University every morning. The branches of the trees stretched out to their limits so that their leaves would absorb the blinding sunlight, and as Yumiko walked beneath the lines of gingko

trees with their outstretched, pale green leaves, she rubbed her sleepy eyes and thought of the phone call she had received the night before.

That call had come while she was cleaning up after dinner. Her mother casually picked up the receiver, then called to her.

"Yumiko, it's from someone called Yamanaka. Have you got a boyfriend already?"

"Yamanaka...?" As Yumiko cocked her head, wondering if she had a classmate with that name, then had a flash of insight.

"I'm sure he's just passing on a message from school," Yumiko lied at once. While thinking of who it might be, she waited a little bit before gently picking up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Yumiko..."

"...."

The sound of faint breathing was all that could be heard from the other side.

"Hello?"

"Stay home from school tomorrow." All of a sudden, a hushed voice sounded into Yumiko's ear. For an instant, Yumiko thought the voice sounded like Nakajima's, but she couldn't be sure.

"Hello, who is this?"

"He's after you. You should stay away for a while." The tone of the voice became urgent. But that only made it seem more suspicious, and as Yumiko tried to decide how to respond, she noticed her mother had stopped cleaning the dishes and was watching her suspiciously.

"We can talk about this at school tomorrow." Yumiko calmly said.

There was the sound of a clicking tongue as the phone hung up on the other end.

"What was that about?" Yumiko's mother asked worriedly.

"It was nothing. Being really popular is really a pain sometimes." Distracting her mother with an unintelligible response, Yumiko tried to recall what Nakajima's normal speaking voice sounded like.

College students in blue jeans and T-shirts passed by Yumiko, discussing their plans for summer vacation. One of them who was carrying a guitar case in his left hand bumped into her.

"Ah, sorry!" As Yumiko looked up suspiciously, the college student smiled shyly at her, but she simply ignored him and looked away.

That really might have been Nakajima...

Yumiko wasn't sure at the time, but thinking about it afterwards, she had the sense that the mysterious person that called her talked a lot like Nakajima.

But if that was the case, what was he trying to tell her? The voice on the phone had been very serious. It was full of desperation, almost like that of someone trying to escape from a pursuer.

What could have happened to him?

After the call, Yumiko had tried to prepare for the next day's class, but even when trying to focus on her textbooks, she kept picturing Nakajima's stare while looking at the typeface on the page, and none of the information in the book stuck. Not only could she not study, but kept up wondering about the phone call, Yumiko had barely slept a wink. Her head dizzy with insomnia, the baseball club members, having finished their morning practice, chatted amongst themselves as they walked by.

Yumiko turned to the left off of University Avenue and through the gates of her school. At that instant, a harsh shiver ran up her spine and her arms broke out in goosebumps. Wondering what happened, she looked around her, and noticed that Ohara was staring at her from the window in the faculty lounge. Her pitch-black eyes had an almost supernatural, sinister look in them, and watched Yumiko's every move. Absorbed in the stare, Yumiko started walked uneasily, and a male student on a bicycle lightly touched her.

"Hey, careful! Watch where you're going!" The bicycle sped up and the student pedaled away.

Returning to her senses, Yumiko looked back up at the window to the faculty lounge, but Ohara was no longer there. As waves of students proceeded inside the school so as not to be late, they turned around and gave quizzical looks at Yumiko, who was standing there as still as a post.

What are you doing? This isn't like you! Admonishing herself, Yumiko ran into the school. Yumiko ran into her classroom and managed to make it to her seat before the opening bell rang. Soon afterwards professor Ohara entered the classroom and looked over it with a calm face, just as usual. Yumiko had seen her crazy state that night in the CAI room, but even before that, the two had never gotten along. Looking down as if not to make eye contact with anyone, Ohara directed the students to go to the CAI room.

The CAI room for a classical Japanese lesson? What does she intend to do there?

From Yumiko's experience, the CAI system in Jusho High was only used for science, math, and English. Why would they need computers to teach classical Japanese?

Paying no attention to the dubious Yumiko, her classmates closed their books and stood up, leaving their pens at their desks. Yumiko instinctively looked around to see if Nakajima was in class, but his desk was clean, and it looked like he hadn't arrived at school yet.

"He's after you. You should stay away for a while." All of a sudden, Yumiko remembered the words from the mysterious telephone conversation the night before. A bead of cold sweat ran down her neck from her temple to chest.

"Hey, are you OK?" Yumiko's friend Kano Miyuki entered her spaced-out gaze. Yumiko's big black eyes were sparkling mischievously.

"Hey now Yumiko, no cutting class."

"No, I really don't feel well...."

"Come on, let's go." Miyuki was oddly enthusiastic as she grabbed Yumiko's arm and pulled her up out of her seat. Right at that moment, Ohara came close to the two.

"Ms. Shirasagi, you look a little pale. Do you need to take a rest in the infirmary?" She spoke in a voice that sounded a little bit too kind.

"It's OK, professor. I'll be with her to make sure she's all right." With a grand gesture, Mikuki patted Yumiko on the shoulder. The other students ignored the exchange as they left the room. But Yumiko sensed that there was something unnatural about the way they moved.

They're not acting normal!

A shiver ran down Yumiko's spine, and Miyuki gripped her hand more tightly.

"I'm OK, Miyuki. I can walk on my own." Despite her confident words, Yumiko's voice was shaking. She was determined to throw off Miyuki's grip and make a break for it as she left the classroom, but the minute she stepped out of the door, a throng of male students surrounded her.

"Come on, let's go." As he urged Yumiko along, Takai's eyes wandered aimlessly through the air. Before she knew it, Yumiko was in the dead center of the throng of her classmates. Miyuki continued to hold her arm tightly. Her delicate frame belied the incredible strength of her grip.

"Please, let go of me." As Yumiko opened her mouth to cry out, a handkerchief was thrust into her mouth to gag her. The students walked in file along the corridor, centered around Yumiko as she tried to escape.

As soon as the class was inside the CAI room, Ohara quickly shut the door.

Click.

As if signaled by the sound of the lock, the students stopped moving. Finally released from Miyuki's grasp, Yumiko looked around the classroom and let out a shrill cry.

It's just like it was that night!

There were no chairs or tables in the classroom; Nakajima sat in a leather sofa in the middle of the room. There was a twinge of pity and regret in his face as he stared at Yumiko.

Nakajima, why... Yumiko's lips moved as if pleading for an explanation.

Looking straight at Yumiko, Nakajima slowly stood up and pointed at the sofa that he had been sitting in.

"Today, this is your seat." His low murmur pierced Yumiko's soul. The events of that night vividly resurfaced in her mind.

"No, I won't!" Unable to stand, Yumiko slumped to the floor. The many scratches on the linoleum tiles only too vividly reminded her of that evening. That night, Nakajima said that he offered Ohara to a demon. Was that for real? And now, was she going to be the next offering? Unable to run or get help, Yumiko started sobbing, and her tears trailed off her cheeks to the floor.

Black vinyl high heels stepped on Yumiko's tears pooled on the ground. Nervously looking up, Yumiko saw Ohara looking down on her with an eerie smile on her face.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on, stand up." Holding out her hand, Ohara spoke in a soft, coaxing voice.

"No! No!" Yumiko furiously shook her head, and looked to Nakajima as if seeking rescue.

"It's too late now. There's no other way." Nakajima spoke as if trying to convince himself, and Yumiko listened in despair. Nakajima's narrow eyes turned to the host computer beyond the plate glass as their magnetic tapes began to spin. As if in time with the tape, the display in front of flashed in brilliant colors.

"Prepare the sacrifice." There was no hesitation in Nakajima's voice as he gave the order. Yumiko saw several students approach her to bring her to the chair. However, the next instant, a sudden earthquake stopped them.

"STOP!" A gut-wrenching, solemn voice cried out.

"Why did you stop them, Loki!?" Losing his calm at the unexpected turn of events, Nakajima gripped the microphone, his hands covered with cold sweat.

"I don't need your help any more," Loki said.

"What!?"

"Don't you get it, Nakajima? I already have the ability to materialize in the Assiah world on my own."

Nakajima's eyes were filled with shock as right in front of his eyes, the monitor displaying Loki started to ooze a blue haze. Right then and there, a dimensional tear between the demon and human worlds was starting to form. Giving off vibrantly-colored light like an aura, the atmosphere twisted and writed unusually, and a pungent cold air burst forth.

Yumiko just stood and watched the haze billow forth, her mouth agape. She was probably paralyzed with fear at the unbelievable events unfolding in front of her eyes. The haze gradually thickened, and started to move itself into a vaguely-defined shape, much like a hologram. Slowly, the form solidified. The light dancing amongst the frigid gust changed into flowing black hair, and the outline of a handsome face gained bronze skin, its deep black eyes gazing at the students in the room.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh." In an ancient language, Loki declared his own divinity. Ohara, who had at some point fallen on her knees in front of him, put her hands together, looked up at him in awe, and spoke the same words as if worshiping an all-powerful god.

To think that Loki would have affected Ohara this much... Powerless, Nakajima stared at Loki and Ohara.

I should have considered the possibility that this could happen. I'd better find a weakness, and soon!

Nakajima frantically pointed a sensor connected to his computer at the nearly-fully-formed Loki. Calling up the ISG host computer, he sent the data about the demon that the sensor

gathered to the Craft AI. Meanwhile, Loki extended his hand toward Yumiko, who was rigid with terror. His bronze, naked body was beautifully symmetrical, almost like the Greek Apollo, and his muscular chest was covered in black scales. His black eyes, from which no one could possibly fathom any emotion, paralyzed her.

"Come over here." Pointing his taloned finger at Yumiko, Loki ordered her in a low, cold voice. Yumiko looked to Nakajima for help, but he merely glanced at her and continued talking with the AI.

Nakajima knew he wouldn't have a chance if he tried to fight Loki directly. But Loki could probably not risk doing anything to him so long as he had control of the computer environment. Nakajima urgently knew that he had to find some sort of weakness to Loki while he still had the chance. He also was guessing that Loki would not be able to leave the magnetic field being generated by the computer.

However, just as Yumiko tried to stagger away and flee, a strange sound emanated from Loki's arms. For a moment they looked like they were beginning to melt, and then all of a sudden changed into a giant, jiggling, pink-colored blobs of protoplasm. From their tips, multiple tentacles lashed out and wrapped around Yumiko's limbs like whips.

"No, stop!" The tentacles grabbing onto the crying Yumiko's limbs pulled her up into the air, toward the body of the blob. A new pink tentacle sprouted and grabbed onto Yumiko's body, and the liquid emanating from its membrane melted her clothes, grabbed onto her now-exposed skin and started writhing along her slender body.

>CRAFT, HURRY!

Plugging his ears so he wouldn't have to hear Yumiko's screams, Nakajima frantically kept hitting the keys. Finally the data transfer LED lit up, and Craft sent a response.

>ACCORDING TO THE DATA YOU SENT, THE JELLY SUBSTANCE IS 58% WATER AND 17% ECTOPLASM. THE REMAINING MATTER IS NOT NATIVE TO THE PLANET AND CANNOT BE ANALYZED.

>HAS THERE EVER BEEN A CASE OF SIMILAR MATTER BEING DISCOVERED BEFORE?

> YES. THIS CENTURY, SIMILAR MATTER WAS DISCOVERED IN A MAYAN TEMPLE AND IN NEW HAMPSHIRE.

> WHAT IS ITS WEAK POINT?

> I CANNOT MAKE A HYPOTHESIS DUE TO INSUFFICIENT DATA. HOWEVER, THE MATTER DISCOVERED UNDER A RELIEF IN THE MAYAN TEMPLE WAS REPORTED TO HAVE EVAPORATED WHEN IT CAME IN CONTACT WITH MERCURIC SULFIDE-BASED PAINT.

> MERCURIC SULFIDE? YOU MEAN A MIXTURE OF MERCURY AND SULFUR. BUT I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO FIND SOMETHING LIKE THAT. TELL ME HOW TO DEAL WITH HIM NOW!

> UNFORTUNATELY I DO NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT DATA TO PROVIDE AN ANSWER.

Angry at Craft's request for more data, Nakajima punched the keyboard.

At that moment, a strange gasping voice broke Nakajima's train of thought. Turning around, he noticed Ohara, who was writhing around at Loki's feet, hugging her breasts with her chest fully exposed. Nakajima did not miss the fact that a fist-size patch of her skin below her breasts was glowing. He immediately reported the situation to Craft and asked what happened.

> THE MOST LIKELY CONCLUSION IS THAT SHE IS PREGNANT WITH THE DEMON'S CHILD. SIMILAR SYMPTOMS HAVE BEEN REPORTED IN EUROPE BEFORE.

"That's impossible! Ohara only had sex with Loki in a virtual world. Could it be..." Thinking of the terrible possibilities, Nakajima shuddered in fear. Could it be that Loki had already materialized several times before, only he never realized it? Meanwhile, as if in tune with Ohara's gasps, Loki's entire body started to change into something bizarre. Aside from his face, all his skin turned pink, and as if its cellular structure changed entirely, started to secrete a viscous substance.

"Aah..."

Letting out a cry of joy, Ohara tore off her clothes and grabbed onto Loki's legs. Loki's body started to jiggle like jelly and started to envelop her. Be it the gods on Mount Olympus or the monsters of Hades, many of those from other worlds had their hearts stolen by the beauty and sexual allure of human females. Most likely even for a demon as powerful as Loki, he could not resist becoming aroused by the prospect of having his way with two beautiful women.

Leaving his handsome face the way it was, he started changing into a cylindrical lump of flesh that sprouted countless small tentacles. The pink protoplasm started to glow and the movement of the tentacle fondling Yumiko's body became faster and rougher.

Yumiko lost all will to resist, and her head fell to the side limply as she passed out. Loki started to pull her doll-like body into his own. But he did not notice that Ohara was glaring furiously at Yumiko even as she was enveloped within the protoplasm.

Many women could not resist the allure of demons and fell madly in love with them once they had sex with them once, even if they despised them normally. For Ohara, who had devoted herself body and soul to Loki, watching him have sex with one of her students in front of her eyes was an unbearable humiliation. Once both of Yumiko's slender white legs had sunken into the protoplasm until she was almost inside Loki up to her chest, Ohara went mad with jealousy, grabbed her head, and started to twist it.

"Agh!" Yumiko's face twisted into pain, and her body spasmed in agony.

"Stop! Stop it!" Crying out in anguish, Nakajima ran to her, only to be struck hard in the face by a thick tentacle. Knocked back against the wall, his vision blacked out for an instant,

and when he finally managed to pull himself off the floor, Yumiko's body showed no signs of life; her head was twisted to the side unnaturally and her eyes were open and glazed over.

Sitting atop the pillar of flesh, Loki's face took on a surprised expression, and glared with displeasure at Ohara inside his body. But being closer and more used to her, she was most likely more important than Yumiko. Loki lifted his tentacle and dumped Yumiko's body on the floor.

Inside, Nakajima went mad with regret.

Why didn't I warn her more seriously last night? If I hadn't made such a half-assed phone call and instead told her everything, this never would have happened. I killed Shirasagi Yumiko!

Not only did he never think that Loki would have attained the knowhow to materialize himself, but he also never thought that Ohara might kill Yumiko. But here Loki's sinister body was here in the Assiah world and the innocent Yumiko had been killed.

And he just looked on, powerless.

Reflexively biting down in his lip, Nakajima noticed a faint scarlet light in his peripheral vision and jerked up his head. Loki's body had spread out to the entire CAI room, and the classroom looked like a jungle of protoplasm. Pink tentacles pulsated and twisted, grabbing hypnotized students, pulling them inside Loki's body where they were consumed one by one. However, the red light that had caught Nakajima's attention lay beyond the carnage. By the entrance of the room the atmosphere was permeated with red, and shook like an aurora.

There's a dimensional warp! It can't be--a demon other than Loki....? But as Nakajima's attention was drawn away, several stentacles wrapped around his legs.

"Loki, what are you doing to me!?" Nakajima could not believe that Loki would attack him, and was shocked in surprise to his very core.

"I bet you thought you were safe so long as you were in charge of the computer. But this woman can serve as your replacement easily enough. Now that I can appear in the Assiah world, not only are your abilities no longer useful--they're a liability." As if to back up Loki's statement, Ohara laughed inside his body.

Nakajima immediately grabbed his handheld computer and entered the command to summon Kerberos. From the liquid crystal display, a white mist wafted into the room.

"Go, Kerberos!"

As if in response to Nakajima's cry, the mist rapidly solidified, and as if impatient to fully take form, assaulted Loki.

"You are a beast of the demon world and yet you side with the human!?"

Flame-like breath burst forth from the fang-lined maw, and Loki let out a cry that shook the very earth. Deftly dodging an attacking tentacle as it gave forth a slimy sound, the demon beast Kerberos bit down at its base and tore it off of Loki's body. Loki's purple blood gushed out and melted the linoleum tiling on the floor. With the two demons letting out roars like

thunder, cracks shot up the plate glass window, and the ceiling and walls started to crumble. Despite fighting fiercely, Loki refused to drop Nakajima.

"Kerberos, over here!"

As Kerberos lept through the air in response to Nakajima's cry, he was finally caught by a tentacle that wrapped around his body. However, his tail split into half and became two serpents which raised their heads and tore off the tentacle grabbed onto him. Freed from Loki's grasp, Kerberos leapt at the tentacles restraining Nakajima in an attempt to save him.

As if to thwart the beast's effort, Loki bent his tentacle and smacked Nakajima's head to the floor. The impact was almost enough to crush his skull, and Nakajima's consciousness wavered as fresh blood poured from the split in his forehead, his field of vision becoming drenched in red. With his vision distorting, the ferociously fighting Kerberos seemed like a far-away illusion.

So this is the pathetic fate of the magician...

As his consciousness faded and he prepared to die, memories of those strange illusions from before spontaneously appeared in a corner of Nakajima's mind.

What were those? The woman from them called that man that looked just like him "Izanagi." Did it have any connection to the story of Izanami and Izanagi from Japanese mythology?

Even if I knew, what difference does it make now...?

Muttering to himself, Nakajima closed his eyes as if in acceptance of his fate.

At that moment, unbeknownst to anyone, the heart of the seemingly dead Yumiko started to beat faintly.

Yumiko, Yumiko! A kind voice was calling her name.

Who are you? Is that you, Mom? Yumiko asked instinctively in her mind.

As if recognizing that she had awakened, the voice cut off briefly, then started to speak again in a kind voice.

Stand up, Yumiko.

Yumiko did not hear the roars of the demon beast nor the sound of the classroom being destroyed. In fact, she had no sense of the terrible experience that she had had at all. All she could hear was the voice of the woman. Timidly opening her eyes, Yumiko realized that the voice was coming from the red aurora in the warped area in the air.

Through the aurora, the mirage of a peaceful countryside was visible. Blue rice paddies with not-yet-ripened seeds. Rolling hills covered in summer grass. And groups of giant boulders, simple yet mysterious.

Yumiko had seen that scenery somewhere before.

Isn't that the Asuka Ishibutai tomb...? As the thought popped into her mind, the woman's voice spoke again.

When you were Izanami in a former life, that's what you called it.

My former life? Izanami...you mean the goddess from Japanese mythology?

Yumiko was confused by the suddenness of the words. But what the voice said had the sense of an undeniable truth to them.

Stand, Yumiko. This space in the air is connected to Asuka, where I rest. Take Nakajima--no, your dearest Izanagi--and come to me.

The instant she stood in obedience to the voice, the angry cries of Loki and the roars of Kerberos filled Yumiko's ears as she was brought back to reality. Overwhelmed with a sudden dizziness, she immediately sat down again. But as blood rushed to her head and she saw the crumpled Nakajima on the floor, she was struck with an overwhelming sense of duty.

I've got to save him!

It was a feeling greater than love or friendship, but closer to instinct. It was a powerful emotion, as if the boy named Nakajima Akemi was literally a part of her, and if he was lost there would be no meaning to her continued existence. Without any idea how to save him, she stood up and clenched her teeth, and the voice sounded again.

For a moment, I am going to enter your body so you can use my power--the power to burn anything you stare at with conviction. I pray that your body can take the strain of it.

From the dimensional rift, a blinding flash pulsed, and a pure power Yumiko had never felt the likes of before rushed through her body.

"GYAAH!"

A bizarre cry snapped Nakajima Akemi back to consciousness.

Opening his eyes, he saw that Loki's tentacle was spasming over his head, smoking and giving off the stench of cooked meat. Enduring the headsplitting pain, Nakajima sat up. Pillars of flame burst out of various spots on Loki's body, and his charred tentacles flailed through air like waves, all giving off the same smoke with the cooked meat smell.

Furthermore, Yumiko--who he thought was dead--was facing off against him; gouts of flame shot out of everywhere she stared at. In medieval Europe, when magic use was at its height, the ability was called spontaneous combustion.

What the heck is going on...? Nakajima stared dumbfoundedly at Yumiko, wielding a power he could never have imagined her controlling. But soon, Nakajima noticed that her face was unusually pale, and that her entire body was shuddering. Just with the force of her will, Yumiko was channeling the immense power of Izanami, and her body was getting close to the limit of what it could stand.

Meanwhile, under intense attack from the flame, Loki ejected Ohara from inside his body and started to chant a spell in an eerie rythm. The pink protoplasm started to condense, changing back into the form of the bronze-skinned youth that Loki had first appeared as.

Yumiko desperately channeled her will and attempted to incinerate Loki with the power of

Izanami, but the flames simply dispersed harmlessly off of the bronze skin, showing no effect at all. However, Loki did not budge and inch and simply stood still as if waiting for her to expend all her energy. A wave of intense exhaustion swept over Yumiko's body, and her vision started to waver. Right as she felt like she was going to drop to her knees, no longer able to withstand the effort, the voice sounded once more.

Hurry, get Nakajima and escape!

Her courage restored by the voice, Yumiko ran over to Nakajima, but slipped and stumbled. However, determined not to show any weakness, she immediately looked up and glared at Loki. Looking at her determined expression, something awoke in Nakajima's despair-filled soul. Ever since he was beaten up over a foolish misunderstanding and made the decision to summon a demon, Nakajima sealed off his emotions, but in that instant they came back, and he felt a kind of love that he had never experienced before.

For her sake, I can't die!

Nakajima's dizziness dissipated. He quickly looked around the room. At some point, the still-naked Ohara had gone over to a terminal's keyboard, and was looking up at the screen while typing in commands. She was not as nearly as skilled as Nakajima, but she was clearly used to operating a computer. As Nakajima realized that Ohara was saving the changes in the data that had occurred when Loki materialized, he immediately understood his unusual actions.

The reason that Loki was staying close to the terminal was almost undoubtedly because he was not completely confident in his own materialization. There was a very good chance that his protoplasmic blob-form was a result of a coincidental bug in the transfer of the data. Loki must have been practicing transforming into that form. He probably did not know what would happen if he tried to leave the magnetic field generated by the computer in his true form. It may have very well been that he had gained his freedom by escaping the limitations of existing digitally, but there was still a danger of annihilating himself entirely. Just in case, Ohara was saving all the data.

In the instant Nakajima realized this, he decided that he would be able to escape if he tried now. As he quickly used his handheld computer to recall Kerberos, who had been defeated in the battle and was now lying on his side as if he was dead, Loki noticed Nakajima's movement.

No matter what happened, Loki could not let Nakajima escape; he knew everything about him. Even knowing the danger it would put him in, Loki stepped toward Nakajima, away from the computer.

"Nakajima, look out!" Yumiko desperately stood up. At that moment everything went red, and Yumiko's lips moved in words that even she was not trying to say.

"Back, demon!"

For a moment, Izanami took over Yumiko's body entirely and released all her energy. A gout

of flame erupted on the approaching Loki's forehead, at the one spot where his body was still in gelatinous form. Loki let out a cry like an enraged beast, and the Izanami-possessed Yumiko grabbed Nakajima's body and headed for the aurora.

Overcome with shock and rage, Loki let out a roar and went after them. For an instant, Loki's body wavered like heat haze and his bronze skin became almost translucent. Numbers flowed like mad over the terminal's display, and Ohara powerlessly glared at the screen.

However, a few instants later, the host computer stopped going haywire and Loki got back his form. Right before the folds of the aurora enveloped Nakajima and Yumiko's bodies, billowing as if being carried by the wind, Loki clawed at the two.

His long talons gouged deep into Yumiko from the nape of her neck to the middle of her back, and fresh blood poured out from the wound. But as soon as the aurora enveloped the two it immediately started fading. The only thing left behind in space where the aurora was were streaks of Yumiko's blood, and the room shook with the anguished cry of the now completely summoned Loki .

Part 4: Down the Road

Chapter 1

Since the previous evening, it had been drizzling in the Asuka area. There, ancient thickets of cedars blocked the sunlight, making it dark on Ayakashi mountain, even during dayling. A statue deep in the mountains that somewhat resembled a monkey--placed there ages before even the Tenbyo era in the eighth century--looked up at the sky with its huge eyes that almost took up half its face.

The rain falling in front of the statue appeared to become tinged with crimson, and started to waver, despite the winds being calm. Presently something like an aurora appeared between two moss-covered old tree trunks. This phenomenon, called "Ayakashi" by the people of Yamato, was the origin mountain's name. The aurora increased in density, shining a brilliant festival of lights on the normally dark mountainside. A sudden gust of wind blew the light rain aside, and as it appeared to shake the aurora itself, the shapes of two people appeared in midair.

In an instant, the two shapes took form and dropped to the grass below. Just as it had appeared, the aurora gradually lost its light and vanished. As if it had never been there, the drizzle fell through the area where it had hovered a moment before.

According to the traditions of the local people, the gods of Yamato used this "Ayakashi" to travel to China and India. Those unfortunate humans who entered it unknowingly would vanish and never be seen again, so people were forbidden to approach it. Izanami surely had used that power to save Nakajima and Yumiko.

With the feeling of the calm wind through the trees on his skin and the cold rain on his cheek, Nakajima opened his eyes. Next to him, as if buried in fern leaves, lay the half-naked Yumiko.

Where are we?

Not letting go of Yumiko's hand, Nakajima warily looked around at his surroundings. The world he had seen beyond the Aurora had been one of fields and rolling hills, yet the two were currently in a dim forest.

Either way, they were safe. That, of course, was due to Yumiko's courage and remarkable power. Wondering how that sweet expression could possibly hold the power to stop a demon in its tracks, Nakajima put his hand on her cheek.

However, Yumiko's cheek was hard and cold, almost as if she was a doll of ice. Telling himself it was because of the rain, Nakajima took off his shirt and sat Yumiko up so he could put it around her. However, when he put his hand behind her delicate shoulder, it came back covered in thick black clots of blood. Timidly looking at her back, Nakajima suppressed

the urge to cry out and shuddered.

From her right shoulder to her waist, Yumiko's back had been brutally torn open, so that even her bones were visible. Just trying to grab her, Loki's claws had dealt her a terrible wound. As if awakening from a deep sleep, Yumiko opened her eyes. Her calm, pure expression betrayed no hint of pain from the wound as she gazed at Nakajima and whispered "I'm sorry."

"...."

Nakajima did not know how to respond, and simply hugged Yumiko tight. He should have been the one apologizing. Having Yumiko say as much to him hurt far worse than it would if she had condemned him.

But Yumiko's words had a meaning to them. She murmured into Nakajima's ear.

"Sorry...I don't think I'm going to survive this. But will you wish to bring me back?"

"What are you saying! You won't die just from this wound! Hang on!"

"No, that's not it. Izanami told me earlier. It's not just because of this wound on my back. I borrowed Izanami's power to fight Loki. But her power was far too strong for me to handle..."

"Izanami?"

Nakajima was shocked by the words that came suddenly out of Yumiko's mouth. With his background in magic and mythology, he was able to grasp the meaning of what she said, even if only vaguely. At the same time, he realized the meaning of the strange visions that he had seen several times before.

They had been an exact replay of Japanese mythology. In order to bring back his dead wife Izanami, Izanagi, the father of the gods, went to the land of Yomi. But while there, Izanagi looked at his wife, who had become hideous, breaking a great taboo in doing so. Therefore, he was forced to abandon her and flee back to the surface.

"She told me that I am a reincarnation of Izanami. And that if you desire for me to return to life, you should bring my body deep into her grave, right to the room where she is entombed. If you do so then I will return to life, and this time we can live together." Saying so, Yumiko started coughing fiercely.

As her throat shuddered, Nakajima wiped aside the fresh blood that she coughed up.

"Yumiko, don't talk like that. You're not going to die. We're going to live happily ever after." Nakajima had never opened up to a woman before, but at this clear statement of his feelings, Yumiko's pale face turned into a smile.

"Thanks. Don't abandon me mid-way like Izanagi did in the myth..." Yumiko closed her eyes and as if going to sleep, drew her last breath.

Embracing her body and stroking her wet hair, a fire of emotion blazed forth inside Nakajima. Putting aside those visions, he had never had any contact from Izanami. But he believed what Yumiko had said entirely. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he had decided to believe her. After all, he *had* summoned Loki, the god from the legends of northern

Europe. Nakajima had no idea how the mechanism for reincarnation worked, but if Izanami from Japanese myth really existed, then he would seek her out.

"Hold on. I promise I'll bring you back." Carefully laying down Yumiko's body, Nakajima picked up the handheld computer that had dropped to his side and turned on the switch. It fortunately appeared to be working.

If only I can summon Kerberos...

As the white mist appeared from the small liquid crystal display, Nakajima breathed a sign of relief. The fully materialized electronic beast roared once, and looked at his master with fire in his eyes. But the wounds he had sustained fighting Loki had robbed Kerberos of his usual vigor. It even looked as if his entire body had gotten a little smaller. It would probably take at least a few months for wounds that serious to heal. It might be possible to heal him by fixing errors in the data that comprised him inside the computer. But Nakajima had never tried to do anything like that before. Even if he did, it wouldn't be something that could be completed in a day or two, and Nakajima didn't have that kind of time. Petting Kerberos' muzzle as if to encourage him, Nakajima pulled Yumiko's body up onto his back and set out.

After ten minutes walking along animal tracks, they emerged from the trees. Far beyond a steep slope covered in kumazasa growth was the scene of a small mountain hamlet shrouded in the mists from the humidity in the air. On the right was a great stone tumulus, and behind it rose mountains emitting a greenish aura.

That's an Ishibutai grave and Tono Peak. So this must be Asuka!

The scenery before Nakajima matched perfectly with the photos in a book about ancient history he had eagerly read over and over long ago. Maybe it was true that an ancient Japanese goddess had called them to the mountains of Asuka, which were intimately entwined with Japanese myth. But how was he supposed to search for Izanami's tomb without any guidance?

As if to encourage Nakajima, who was standing still staring ahead blankly, the demonic beast beside him let out a low growl.

"Yeah, you're right, Kerberos. That has to be it..."

Drawing in his breath deeply, Nakajima balled his right hand into a fist and touched the tip of the beast's sharp fang to his wrist. In an instant, a sharp pain ran through his arm, and fresh blood flowed out of the wound. In order to find the location of Izanami's tomb, Nakajima tried to use his own blood to power and create a thaumaturgic circle. But as his blood fell to the muddly ground, the rain simply washed it away, distorting the shape of the circle. Even though he was dizzy from loss of blood, Nakajima tried to redraw it.

Though he was well-versed in magical theory, Nakajima had always relied on computers up until now, and this was his first experience trying to cast a spell by himself. But there was no hesitation in his expression. There couldn't be a bit of ambiguity when casting spells using a computer. He was sure that there was nothing he could not do, having mastered the theory

to that extent. Deciding on the direction from the Ishibutai and Tono Peak, he used his handheld computer's astrology software to find the position of the stars and phase of the moon, and used it to draw his circle. Completing it and sitting down, Nakajima murmured "Izanami, please tell me where you are," made a sign with his hands, and started to meditate.

Nakajima was far from having any sort of psychic powers, but his feelings toward Yumiko and the unique magnetic field at Mount Ayakashi easily pulled him into a trance. Nakajima concentrated on the silver thread of fate that connected himself and Yumiko. The thread he pictured presently started to glow. Entering a state of deep meditation, Nakajima tried to superimpose the thread that he was picturing on the scenery of the real world. As he focused his spirit to the utmost, deep wrinkles formed in his brow. Finally, in the image he pictured, he could clearly see the silver thread being pulled into two small knolls, knolls that had been plowed into grape fields.

"That must be where Izanami's grave is."

Awakening from his meditation, Nakajima knelt down and looked for something in the scenery around him that matched what he had seen in his trance.

"That's it! That's Izanami's grave!" Nakajima cried aloud.

The two knolls stood in an area to form a perfect triangle between the Ishibutai and Tono Peak. At that moment, perhaps drawn by the smell of blood, several flies crowded around Yumiko and landed on her wound. Brushing them aside irritatedly, Nakajima picked her up and put her up onto Kerberos' back.

Chapter 2

At about that time, in the now-decimated CAI room, Ohara faced the host computer, talking with Loki. Even after being able to take full form, Loki seemed to prefer staying inside the computer in a digital form--it was most likely less of a physical burden.

"Damned Nakajima; he fled all the way to Asuka."

"What should I do? Should I send my students after them, or do you have another idea?"

"No, I'll go myself." Loki's voice was full of resolve. He fully realized that the revolutionary technology of summoning demons with a computers was on par with nuclear weapon technology. If only he could master the transfer of the data that Nakajima had developed, conquering the human world would be more than just a far-fetched dream.

But the same thing could be said of other demons. In order to prevent the technology from getting into the hands of other demons and thus ensure his absolute superiority in the Assiah world, Loki could not let Nakajima live.

Loki had servants that could be called spies--flies. Flies were one of the few creatures that could freely travel between the Assiah and Aztiluth worlds, and Loki had the ability to not only talk with all flies, but to sense everything they experienced on the surface as if he was there himself.

And from them, Loki had learned that Nakajima had appeared in Asuka.

"Well then..." Ohara entered a command into the computer.

Maybe it was just part of Nakajima's database, but displayed onscreen were the numbers for City Banks in the Kinki region. Ohara scrolled the screen and pulled up a map of Japan, referencing it with the phone numbers.

"I think that Fourth Kangyo Bank in Inai would be best."

"OK. Then send me there."

As the magnetic tape started spinning furiously, the screen became awash in brilliant colors. Setting the modem, Ohara pressed each button of Fourth Kangyo Bank's phone number carefully, as if not to make any mistakes.

Chapter 3

Sinking their sneakers into the gravel of the path, the hikers in Asuka hurried along the trail. The faces of all the nearby tourists displayed irritation at the unwelcome arrival of rain. Kerberos shot through the hills at high speed, Nakajima tightly gripping the corpse of Yumiko on his back. But the extremely abnormal sight didn't seem to phase the hikers.

"What was that just now?"

"They must be shooting a movie here, I guess."

The relaxed voices grew faint behind Nakajima. Presently Nakajima arrived at the hills he had seen in his vision. Nakajima did not know that this 200-meter tall hill was a Kofun tomb known as "Shirasagi Mound." Shirasagi mound was huge for a Kofun tomb, and was deeply shrouded in mystery. It was unknown whether or not it was a zenpokoen-fun "keyhole"-style tomb or just one that took advantage of a natural hill, let alone who was buried there or when it was built. However, it had been passed down in oral tradition that a woman had been buried here, and some of those who had studied the treatise "Gishi-Wajin-den" argued that it was the grave of Himiko, the ancient queen of Yamato. In the modern day, fully half of Shirasagi Mound had been cultivated into fields, and of the original burial mound, only a single stone chamber remained, along with a few Kumazasa shrubs and pine woods.

As Kerberos climbed the hill, his movement became visibly slower, and the spasms of his rough breathing could be felt on his back. As soon what appeared to be the entrance to the stone burial chamber appeared, Kerberos finally came to a stop. Nakajima dropped to the ground, leaving Yumiko on the back of the demon beast. And as if his strained nerves had finally reached their breaking point, as Kerberos' front legs bent, he collapsed to the ground. Perhaps his wounds from the battle with Loki had worsened, or perhaps Shirasagi Mound itself caused pain to the animal, but either way, as if he could no longer take another step, Kerberos stuck his tongue out and started panting, while letting out a low whine. The flicker of fire in his eyes was gone.

"You did good, Kerberos. You can go on back."

Nakajima had no choice but to return the digital beast to his handheld computer.

Chapter 4

At about the same time, in the branch office of Fourth Kangyo Bank in Inai, four female employees were in the operations room, entering data in the host computer to write a patch to send the day's transfers to other bank branches. None of the four were looking down at their keyboards; their glances only turned back and forth from their displays to the numbers on the display vouchers they had been working with.

"Why is my terminal always the one to break!?" One of the workers irritatedly got up from her seat.

Her name was Mida Yoshie. She had been working at the bank for two years and was brilliant but somewhat short-tempered, her bob-cut appearance appropriately complimenting her energetic personality. Yoshie looked closely at the other workers' terminals, but it appeared that she was the only one experiencing the problem. Her screen was completely dark, and didn't respond to any keyboard input at all.

"Isn't that what normally happens when you send data to the host computer?" Shimamura Yuko--whose appearance and personality were the polar opposite of Yoshie's--looked over at her while continuing to enter data into her own terminal.

Yuko had been at the company a year longer than Yoshie and thus was slightly higher on the chain of command.

"Is it just mine then? Oh well, I might as well go make some tea." As Yoshie left the room discontentedly, a blue haze started to seep from the display behind her. A pungent musky smell started to waft throughout the room, but engrossed in their work, nobody seemed to notice it. The blue haze started to coagulate and take form behind the chair that Yoshie had previously been sitting in.

As if she was tired from all the data entry, Yuko thrust her arms toward the ceiling and stretched. A strange jelly-like substance grabbed onto her white throat.

"Yoshie, cut it out."

Yawning and turning around, Yuko found herself staring into the bronze face of Loki, his head atop a bizarre pillar of gelatinous flesh. She tried to scream but found that her vocal chords were frozen and she could not make a sound. The demon's tentacle constricted and crushed Yuko's skull with a lound crunch. From the neck up Yuko was nothing more than a grotesque lump of disfigured flesh, yet her hands continued to tap on the keys of the terminal out of sheer inertia. While the other two women sat paralyzed with fear, other tentacles grabbed them and pulled them inside the demon's body.

Behind Loki, there was a sound of porcelain shattering. Yoshie had returned with tea and dropped her tray at the sight of the unbelievable bloodbath she had walked into. Loki's tentacle stretched out to her stomach. Heat shot through her chest along with a sticky sensation, and the next instant, blinding pain shot through her as fresh blood spurted out of

her rent skin.

"What's going on!?" Hearing the strange sound within the room, a male employee carrying a load of bills to the safe opened the door. Loki mercilessly threw Yoshie's now-decapitated head at his chest with incredible force.

"Agh!"

Knocked hard against the wall, the man just barely managed to search for the emergency alarm and press it with all his remaining strength before passing out.

The shrill sound of the alarm echoed throughout the building. In the midst of the clamor, Loki calmly completed the transformation into his bronze human form, and turned his pitch-black eyes toward Asuka.

Chapter 5

After returning Kerberos to the demon world, Nakajima hoisted Yumiko on his back and arrived at the stone burial chamber of Shirasagi Mound. However, after peering into the small room through the Kumazasa overgrowth, he could not hold back an expression of disappointment. The burial chamber was dug vertically into the ground and was just waiting for him to come in through an opening about 90 centimeters wide and tall. But the walls of chamber itself were only a few meters long at most. It was just tall enough for Nakajima to stand in if he hunched over. It seemed awfully small for the entryway for such a huge Kofun tomb. Was Izanami really here?

Don't panic, this sort of burial chambers must have some sort of trick or secret passage, or something!'Trying to reassure himself, Nakajima lowered himself into the chamber.

The room was stagnant with cold air, and the basalt walls glistened, damp with humidity. Nakajima gently lowered Yumiko off his back and onto the ground. A frog that had been watching this strange intruder from one of the corners of the chamber croaked and jumped forward in surprise. Sitting down on the stone floor, Nakajima entered a trance and tried to make a connection with Izanami. But he had very little experience doing this sort of thing; maybe it was because of his anxiety, but the picture in his mind's eye was unchanging, and the only thing that happened as he sat on the ground was the passage of time. Nakajima furrowed his brow in frustration.

"I can't feel anything, even though I must be much closer to Izanami than I was before. Izanami, answer me--how can I find you?"

As if in response to his whispered question, the entire burial chamber started shuddering. The stones in the walls started to groan, and a bit of dirt fell from the ceiling. Coughing, Nakajima unconsciously pulled Yumiko's corpse closer to him.

"Izanami, answer me, so I can revive Yumiko!" Like he was chanting a spell, Nakajima murmured the same words over and over.

Soon the earthquake subsided, and as if trying to ask something, the frog's croaking became louder. As Nakajima turned and looked in its direction, his eyes glimmered with excitement at what he saw. The earthquake had created a gap between the stones in the wall, such that crimson paint on their edges became clearly visible. Approaching the divide between the flagstones, Nakajima could feel cold air flowing forth from the reddish crack. Twisting his fingers into the gap, Nakajima dislodged the stones one by one, revealing a crawlspace beyond large enough for a person to enter. The crawlspace sloped slightly downward, proceeding deep into the earth.

The pit was shrouded in darkness, but for Nakajima there was no hesitation. Tearing his shirt and using the strips to tie Yumiko and his handheld computer to his body, Nakajima got

down on his stomach and put his feet into the hole. A cold, smooth feeling like marble under his palms gave lie to the fact that the structure was man-made. Hunkered down on all fours so that he would not slip, Nakajima started carefully climbing down the shaft, backwards into the inky blackness below.

Chapter 6

Meanwhile, Loki had left the Fourth Kangyo Bank and was standing at the summit of Tonomine, where he could look out over the whole of Asuka. Below him lay the groups of Asuka megaliths. The drizzle falling on his face, Loki opened his mouth. His throat expanded bizarrely and his tongue started vibrating. The extremely high-frequency pitch of his voice was inaudible to human ears, but as if drawn in by the sound, countless black dots the size of rice grains cut through the rain on a beeline toward him. It was a swarm of flies under Loki's command. Brushing his face with their hairy legs, they flew into his ear canals and each whispered something to him.

After hearing all the information he needed, Loki ordered the flies "OK, Go!" and they returned to their posts. Rubbing the wound on his forehead, Loki stared at Shirasagi Mound.

Nakajima...what do you intend to do, going in there....?

He knew that Nakajima did not escape to Asuka on his own power. Nor was it Yumiko's power that brought them there either. A human woman would never have the power to wound a demon. Most likely a Japanese god or demon had possessed her, and summoned them here to Asuka. And it would be safe to assume that it was quite a powerful one at that.

"I don't care who you are, but I won't let you get away with this. I'll crush you to a pulp!" Loki murmured, charging down the slope toward Shirasagi Mound.

Part 5: Sword of Fire

Chapter 1

The cave sloped down gently, seemingly continuing on forever. Stiffening his limbs, Nakajima slowly held his balance, climbing backwards. As the sounds of his labored breathing echoed off the smooth walls of the shaft, the entrance far above him started to vanish in the distance. The reverberations made it almost sound as if Yumiko, strapped to Nakajima's back, was breathing, and several times Nakajima stopped and strained his ears.

But the shoulders of the corpse were as slumped over as usual, and stopping, Nakajima only detected the stench of death.

His sense of the passage of time was long gone. The tunnel was so long that he almost thought that it continued all the way to the center of the earth. Nakajima's arms and legs felt strained with the effort of supporting the weight of two bodies, and if he let his concentration slip for even a moment he felt that he would lose his grip and slide all the way down. Twisting his body, Nakajima pulled off his shoes and socks and continued downwards in bare feet. This way he could be more sure of his footholds. Had he been here by himself, he might have been able to slide all the way down the shaft. But if Yumiko's body was damaged, all his effort would have been for nothing.

All of a sudden, Nakajima found his feet in thin air.

"Agh!"

Desperately extending his arms forward and clawing at the air, a sense of loss, terror, and despair shot through Nakajima's body. An instant later. Nakajima was painfully slammed against a hard stone surface. He had fallen straight down about two or three meters. Unconsciously moving to protect Yumiko's body, Nakajima's shoulders and back took more of the shock than they should have, and unable to stand, he lost consciousness.

There was a faint light and a calm breeze. The cold caressing his cheek, Nakajima opened his heavy eyelids. A little ways away, Yumiko's body lay next to him silently. He felt light, and it didn't seem like he had any broken bones. In fact, while he hurt, it wasn't enough to worry about. Getting his energy together and standing up, Nakajima took a deep breath. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, his surroundings became clearer.

And what mysterious surroundings they were! Nakajima found himself standing in a plaza carved out in a niche between towering cliffs. The face of the walls around him were deep crimson. About three meters up in one wall was a dark opening; most likely, it was the shaft that Nakajima had just crawled down. Being underground, there should have been a visible ceiling, but looking up, the walls simply climbed up until the red stones were shrouded in the darkness above. At the end of the plaza, a narrow path stretched out into the bottomless

darkness. Was this the pathway to Izanami's burial chamber? Unlike the earlier shaft, this appeared to be a natural underground ravine. The phosphorescent light illuminating it, and the entire underground chamber, appeared to be given off from mossy plants growing on the rock face. Nakajima recalled the scene from the visions he had of being chased by the rotting woman.

A viscous drop of water fell onto Nakajima's cheek. Listening closely, he could hear the steady sound of a trickle of water coming from high above. Over the aeons, the lime deposits in this trickle had accumulated here and there along the path, forming giant stalagmites. Nakajima touched the rising cliff face to feel it. The surface of the cold stone was wet with condensation. When he scratched it, the rock crumbled away easily, revealing a new layer of red stone below. When recalling that the ancient red paint used in ancient Japanese tombs was mercuric-sulfide based, Nakajima suddenly remembered Craft's words.

When explorers discovered material that was apparently part of a demon's body in a Mayan temple, it evaporated when coming into contact with their mercuric-sulfide based paint. In other words, this tomb was designed specifically to keep demons out. Getting up his courage with this realization, Nakajima picked up Yumiko's body and walked toward the depths of the red valley. However, Nakajima never had that much in the way of stamina in the first place. In less than ten minutes, his legs were exhausted. He would have liked to have Kerberos' help, but he didn't want to put any more stress on the already terribly-injured demon. Besides, one could hardly say this path would be the most appropriate place for him, with the walls literally painted with demon repellent.

Breathing heavily with exhaustion, Nakajima proceeded along the path to the burial chamber, the stone walls towering up into the air alongside him. The sweat dripping off of his forehead into his eyes blurred his vision, and each step took every ounce of effort he had. Nakajima shook his head back and forth to get rid of the built-up perspiration, and when his vision cleared, he noticed a white silhouette in his peripheral vision.

"Who's there!?"

Looking closer, he could tell that there was more than just one silhouette--in fact there were quite a few of them. But none of them displayed any indication of movement, and simply stood or squatted there. gingerly approaching one, Nakajima could see that it was a bleached mummy, its head tilted to the side and its black eye sockets staring up into space. Whether it was the power of the mercuric sulfide or the cold of the underground chamber, the corpse had been preserved from natural decay. Its chest area had what looked like a deliberately drilled large hole in it. Looking around, it appeared that the dozen or so mummies here were scattered about without any order to them. Judging by their clothing, they appeared to be the bones of people from many different time periods. One wore primitive robes, another appeared to be wearing the eboshi hat of a Kamakura-era samurai, and yet another looked like an Edo-period peasant. Many of them had signs of their bones being crushed by large

jaws or having their throats torn out. Few people would come into a place like this by accident; these were most likely grave robbers here to plunder the Kofun tomb. Who was it that did this to them?

All of a sudden, the sound of a bizarre cry assaulted Nakajima's ears.

"YAAH! GLULULU!"

It sounded like the voice was coming from far away, but the unusual reverberations produced from the walls of the burial pathway made it difficult to judge the distance of sounds. Nakajima cast a sidelong glance at the butchered corpses of the mummies. If the grave guardian that mercilessly slaughtered these would-be grave robbers was still patrolling this path to the burial chamber now...

As Nakajima shuddered, that very same guardian lept out in front of his eyes from the shadow of a great rock.

"Yomotsu-Shikome!" Nakajima cried.

The fierce image of the monster woman from his vision was burned into Nakajima's memory. But the Yomotsu-Shikome standing before him was far more grotesque in real life than he had imagined. She was almost exactly twice his height. Her purple-flecked squat legs glistened white with slime, and bloated lower stomach of the torso held up by them stuck out like that of a pregnant woman. The robe she wore seemed almost comical it was so small, and it did not even extend down far enough to cover her breasts, which drooped all the way down to her navel. Her webbed hands shuddered, thick with blubber. Her face was almost exactly that of a green frog, and as she exhaled, two gill-like slits on the side of her throat expanded, exposing the pink fleshy walls within. Her long, shimmering black hair made her look only all the more disgusting.

Yomotsu-Shikome took a step forward. As Nakajima met her gaze, he carefully laid Yumiko down, wiped the cold sweat off his hands onto his slacks, and picked up his handheld computer.

"Kerberos, please come here."

Before the white haze that came out of the liquid crystal display could even take on the shape of a rough outline, it vanished with a weak bark. Apparently the crimson paint of this pathway really did seal off the power of the demon beast.

Yomotsu-Shikome thrust her webbed hands down at the petrified Nakajima's shoulders. Leaping to the side at the last minute, Nakajima slipped and fell on the ground. He desperately tried to get up, but the large hands had already grabbed onto him. Yomotsu-Shikome's long tongue licked the area around her huge mouth, and her rancid breath assaulted Nakajima's senses.

"Izanami, are you going to abandon me after I've come all this way!?" Nakajima instinctively cried out.

For some reason, the instant that the monster woman heard Nakajima's cry, she started

acting strangely. Her mouth agape, she looked at Nakajima with a blank expression, all hostility gone completely. Her eyes looked around the area, then fixated on the body of Yumiko, laying on the side of the path. An expression of awe came over her face.

"Izanami..."

Her throat jiggling, Yomotsu-Shikome spoke the name reverently. Putting Nakajima back on the ground, the monster woman clumsily waddled over to Yumiko, and carefully picked her up as if handling a fragile broken object.

"Hey, wait, what are you going to do with Yumiko!?"

Taking a disapproving glance at Nakajima, Yomotsu-Shikome cocked her head as if to signal him to follow her, and proceeded down the burial pathway, holding Yumiko.

Chapter 2

At that time, Loki swiftly entered Shirasagi Mound, and was standing before the passageway that Nakajima had passed through earlier.

"Just you wait, Nakajima. Soon, I will defile your precious woman before your very eyes before devouring you whole." With a twisted smile on his face, Loki transformed himself into an amorphous blob and oozed into the tunnel.

Loki descended the passageway that took Nakajima hours to traverse in mere minutes. Soon the blob of flesh made a squishing sound as it dropped to the stone floor of the plaza before the burial pathway. At that instant, its outer membrane hissed and gave off smoke as it started to melt.

"Damn you!"

Loki quickly transformed back into his bronze body, and kneeling on the ground, let loose a terrible howl. Most likely, he could not stand the chemical reaction that took place when his protoplasmic body came into contact with the mercuric sulfide. Even now, the one gelatinous place of his body between his eyes throbbed and pulsated.

Gritting his teeth and standing, Loki stared solemnly at the crimson burial road.

Chapter 3

Meanwhile, Nakajima had reached the end of the burial pathway, led by Yomotsu-Shikome. Before him stood a burial chamber. It had to be the spot where Izanami lay.

I've finally made it here...

The chamber itself had no door, but a silvery, fluorescent relief in the floor by the entrance gave off an aura as if guarding the chamber within. It resembled a Solomon Hexagram quite a bit.

Yomotsu-Shikome with her chin as if to urge him inside. As Nakajima started to enter, she gently placed Yumiko down so that he could carry her on his back.

"Aren't you coming in?"

As Nakajima spoke, the monster woman looked as if struck by fear and awe and shook her head. And all of a sudden, Yomotsu-Shikome thrust her long arm down her throat, all the way down to her elbow. Her green neck expanded, and she fiercely vomited. An awful stench wafted up from the bile, and Nakajima reflexively turned away. Yomotsu-Shikome, on the other hand, retrieved two glowing blue spheres from amongst the vomit and presented them to Nakajima. While he didn't particularly want to take them, he didn't want to ignore the beastly woman's kindness, and grimaced as he accepted the gift.

The phlegm-covered spheres felt very light, and fit perfectly into his hands.

"What are these?"

In response to Nakajima's question, the giant woman made a motion of striking her slimy hands together.

"Am I supposed to knock these together?"

Yomotsu-Shikome nodded over and over again, narrowed her eyes, and opened her mouth halfway.

Was that just a smile? Nakajima started to feel a fondness for the monster.

Right at that moment, the sound of someone's cry from the far end of the burial pathway echoed throughout the area. Yomotsu-Shikome shuddered with surprise. Looking behind several times regretfully, she started back along the path.

Stooping over so that Yumiko would not slide off his back, Nakajima wiped off the spheres given to him by the monster woman on his slacks, and knocked them together forcefully. Bright orange fireworks flew in all directions, but aside from that, nothing seemed to happen.

Are these supposed to be used in some sort of ceremony or something?

Unable to find an answer, Nakajima dropped the two spheres into his pocket and straddled over the relief under Yumiko's weight.

The burial chamber itself smelled slightly of flowers. It was about four meters long in every direction. Dozens of pots as high as Nakajima's waist were lined up all around the room. Looking inside them, he could see oil gathered in the bottom. It appeared to be what was giving off the smell of flowers. Most likely, it was a pomade offered to Izanami. Right in front of him stood a white granite dais. On top of it lay ashes in the form of a cross--no, that of a person lying on their back.

Chapter 4

At that moment, Yomotsu-Shikome hurried her pace, sensing a new presence after having led Nakajima to the burial chamber. As she rarely displayed any sort of emotion outwardly, it was unclear whether or not she was thinking "There sure are a lot of intruders today!" but in the thousands of years during which she had protected the sanctity of the Kofun tomb, there was never a time before when it had seen two visitors on the same day. Presently she came upon Loki running down the burial corridor, and she stretched her slimy arms out as far as they could go to block his passage.

"RAUIERE!" Yomotsu-Shikome tried to tell him something in a foreign tongue. She could sense that this intruder possessed a power much different and far greater than the human tomb robbers that had foolishly wandered in before. If possible, she wanted to repel him without having to fight.

Caught off guard, Loki stood still and narrowed his jet-black eyes, as if sizing up the power of this new arrival. Then, he started to walk forward calmly, an arrogant smirk on his face.

Traveling so fast it was not even visible, Loki's fist slammed into Yomotsu-Shikome's still-extended shoulder. Without even a chance to cry out, the monster woman was slammed against the rock wall, her flailing purple-flecked legs kicking at the cold stone floor.

"Did you really think you would be able to stop me?" Loki mocked Yomotsu-Shikome as she finally managed to stand back up.

Having fully regained her senses, Yomotsu-Shikome charged at Loki, bellowing threats at him. But Loki did not even attempt to dodge, and merely grabbed the arm of the fearsomely charging monster woman, and twisted it hard. In an instant, Yomotsu-Shikome's arm was torn off below the elbow, and fresh blood gushed out of the wound. Realizing that she couldn't stand a chance of defeating him by sheer strength, the monster woman made a suicidal charge at Loki, attempting to pin him with her overwhelming weight, and surprised, he fell over as she crashed into him. But even though her attack succeeded, Yomotsu-Shikome's fangs could not penetrate his bronze skin as she attempted to tear out his throat, merely making harmless scraping sounds against his neck.

As Loki plunged his sharp talons into Yomotsu-Shikome's chest and tore out her heart, he nonchalantly threw aside the monster woman as she let out a horrible death cry, proceeding down the path as if nothing had happened.

"Izanami, Izanami...."

Yomotsu-Shikome's sorrowful cries soon became quieter than the gentle breeze flowing through the corridor.

Chapter 5

Though he had made it all the way to Izanami's burial chamber, Nakajima had no idea how to make contact with her, so was at a loss for what to do. A cold chill ran down his spine, and as he looked around, not knowing what just happened, he found himself staring at Loki, who was looking in through the entrance to the chamber. Unable to make a sound, Nakajima just stood still, rooted to the spot.

"Well, it's nice to see you're doing well." Loki calmly folded his arms as he spoke intimidatingly.

Shielding Yumiko's body behind him, Nakajima carefully and cautiously watched Loki to see what he would do. If he had half a mind to, he could easily demolish him in his current defenseless state. So why wasn't he trying to come inside the burial chamber?

Before long, Nakajima's eyes were drawn to the silver relief carved into the floor by the entrance of the chamber. The Hexagram was preventing Loki from entering--that was the only possible explanation. As if maybe he had realized what Nakajima had been thinking, Loki started talking to him in a coaxing tone.

"Nakajima, there is no reason to fear me. If you join forces with me again, you can rule the human world!"

"Hah! You think that will work after you tried to kill me? To start with, I didn't run away from you in the first place. I've got to bring Yumiko back to life, whatever it takes. Now go away and don't bother me."

"You want to revive the woman? Then why don't you ask me to? It would be only too simple for me to teach you the art of Soul-Returning."

The art of Soul-Returning was a spell to revive the dead. However, even if the spell could completely restore a person's body, it could not restore their soul as well.

"The art of Soul-Returning? Are you seriously asking me to replace Yumiko's pure soul with that of a demon!?"

"Pure, you say?" Snickering, Loki opened his jet-black eyes wide as if to coerce Nakajima.

"That seems like an unlikely choice of words for a human who has willfully joined forces with demons. Look at my eyes!" Loki's voice was full of power that was difficult to defy. Reflexively looking into the demon's eyes, Nakajima gulped at the horrific vision that he saw deep within them.

Countless people with heads wrenched off and severed by demon tentacles. Eyes rotting and oozing out of their sockets. Flowing rivers of fresh blood. Kondo Hiroyuki, Takamizawa Kyoko, and a host of women he had never seen before glared at Nakajima, hatred and curses in their eyes. He could almost hear their anguished cries.

"Take a good look, Nakajima. This is all what you wanted. It was none other than you that called me here to the Assiah World." Loki's hearty laughter ripped deep into Nakajima's soul.

But the faint smell of flowers kept Nakajima from breaking down completely.

"The very least I can do now is bring Yumiko back to life."

"Without using the art of Soul-Returning, what can a mere human do to revive the dead?"

"You're very right that I can't do anything myself. But the spirit of Izanami, resting in this burial chamber, will grant my wish."

"Such foolishness!" Loki grinned and laughed. But his lips were twisted somewhat unnaturally. Even with the protection of his thick bronze skin, the crimson paint was starting to consume the demon's body little by little.

"Very well then. If that corpse is so important to you, then knock yourself out." At some point, Loki's laugh had turned into a roar of anger. His pitch-black eyes, full of hatred, turned to Yumiko's corpse. Suddenly white vapor started rising out of her body, and a horrible rotting smell assaulted Nakajima's nostrils.

"Stop it!" Trying to shield her from Loki's gaze, Nakajima ran over to Yumiko. But as he put his hand to the nape of her neck, it came back covered in rotted skin and wet with meaty juices. Unable to control himself, Nakajima vomited into his hand, blackened and covered by the fleshy liquids. Right as Yumiko's neck seemed to droop into an unnatural position, her eyeballs rolled out of her head and onto the floor, trailing blood behind them. Where her nose once was was nothing but a hole in with a few scraps of flesh left in it. Her hair separated from her rotting scalp and fell to the floor. Yumiko's white teeth became visible where her lips rotted away and tore off. Staring dumbfoundedly at her, Nakajima became even more terrified. Yumiko's hand started to move on its own, slowly. His whole body drenched in cold sweat, Nakajima stepped back away from her.

"Why are you doing this to me? Please let me die!" Yumiko finally stood up on her own.

"Please, kill me..." Speaking indistinctively, Yumiko approached Nakajima. Each step she took, a pot shattered, and the pomade inside flowed out onto the floor. Her fingers, merely bone now that their flesh had rotted off, grasped at the air, trying to grab onto Nakajima's hand.

Having completely lost all capacity for reason, Nakajima shook his hand wildly as if to keep Yumiko away, and retreated further into the burial chamber. Slowly and steadily, as if being pulled in on an invisible line, she approached closer and closer to him. No matter how hideous she got, Nakajima could never harm Yumiko, and as he was pressed further and further back into the burial chamber, he placed his hand down onto the granite dais, picked up a handful of ash, and threw it at Yumiko.

Ancient magicians had used ash as a ward against evil spirits, and perhaps memories of this had lodged somewhere deep in Nakajima's subconscious. As the ash landed on the pomade spilling from the broken pots, it flew back up into the air despite there being no hint of a breeze, and started assembling into an image, highlighted like a hologram. The instant Yumiko's extended hand was about to grab onto Nakajima's throat, her body was enveloped

in a flash of crimson.

The spell controlling her cadaver like a puppet was broken. The power flooded out of Yumiko's corpse, and it crumpled to the ground.

"I'm glad you made it, Nakajima." Nakajima returned to his senses as the gentle voice called to him. Her eyes full of kindness, a woman that looked exactly like Yumiko was gazing at him. No, perhaps it was only her silhouette that matched Yumiko's. Her milky-white skin, concealing the divinity within, shone with a slight phosphorescent glow, and her chocolate-brown eyes glimmered with a light suggesting a wisdom clearly different than that of a human.

"Izanami..." Nakajima found himself kneeling all of a sudden. Nodding, the goddess turned toward Loki.

"Demon, return to your world!" Her voice was cold and harsh.

Loki smiled sarcastically, but his expression could not hide his uneasiness.

"You appear to be one of the Kunitsukami of Yamato--why do you go to such lengths to support these humans?"

"Because this girl is my reincarnation."

"Your reincarnation!?"

Loki spread his arms in an exaggerated motion. "Fine, then you can have the girl. In exchange, I will take the boy. It surely will benefit him to join forces with me as well. I still wish to avoid any unnecessary confrontation."

Holding his breath, Nakajima watched the two talk, and a shiver ran down his spine.

"You're just afraid that some other demon will get a hold of Nakajima and his knowledge." Saying so, Izanami strained her eyes and glared at Loki's chest. Red light exploded on his breast, and Loki stumbled back from the blow. The spontaneous combustion power she was using was many times more powerful than when she had possessed Yumiko.

"So that's your answer, eh!?" In anger, Loki's hair stood on end, and he glared at Izanami from the entrance of the burial chamber. But no matter what he did, he could not cross that silver relief. On the other hand, Izanami's power was not dealing any serious damage to him either. But as the two glared at each other, the goddess' expression clouded. Right at that moment, Nakajima noticed the form of a white silhouette in Loki's dark eyes.

I've seen that before...!

Reflected in Loki's eyes was not the Izanami standing before him, but her as a hideous cadaver, chasing after the man she loved.

"Take a good look, Izanami." Loki's low voice wavered the goddess' resolve.

"My eyes reflect whatever your deepest fears are like a mirror. The more you look at them, the more your own fears will make you tremble. I must say that you're quite hideous--I have trouble believing this is your true form." As if to add fuel to the fire Loki was kindling, the image of a single person appeared, that of the young Izanagi, running in terror from the

hideous Izanami chasing him.

"Your mate abandoned you because of your ugliness? How pathetic. Heh, heh, heh."

"You dirty..." Forgetting herself in the humiliation, Izanami started walking towards Loki, as if being pulled in.

"No, Izanami! If you leave the burial chamber, you'll be at Loki's mercy!" At Nakajima's words, Izanami painfully stopped in her tracks, and the dark shadow of someone darted behind her.

Loki's left hand was moving in a rythmical motion. By the time Izanami realized it was a spell to control the dead, it was already too late. Yumiko's corpse had stood up and shoved Izanami from behind, and in her surprise, the goddess stumbled outside of the burial chamber.

Making sure to stay out of her deadly line of sight, Loki kicked out Izanami's legs out from under her, and twisted her arm behind her back, pinning her to the ground.

"That was all too easy! It was foolish for a mere woman like you to try to resist me." The parts of Loki's body that were making contact with Izanami started to change from bronze into pink protoplasm.

"Kunitsukami of Yamato, I will impregnate you with the child of a demon."

With a stench seemingly capable of polluting the purest of substances, the repulsive blob started to spread over Izanami's body. Izanami looked at Nakajima, as if asking for help. But what could the unarmed Nakajima do against a demon that was capable of effortlessly restraining even a goddess? In a last-ditch effort, Nakajima entered a command into his handheld computer. Though trying to summon the electronic beast failed in the crimson burial pathway, the powerful aura in the burial chamber might act as a catalyst to bring its power back. As if in answer to Nakajima's prayers, Kerberos appeared in the chamber and let out a roar that shook its very walls, then stood ready for any orders.

"Kerberos, rescue Izanami!"

The outcome of the battle was clear from the outset. Even if Kerberos was at peak health, Loki was on an entirely different level of power, and Nakajima already knew what the result of such a match would be. Add to that the fact that the demon beast was already hurt and tired, and it became even all the more obvious. Even so, Kerberos resolutely leapt at Loki in attack. The beast's instinct had most likely already told it that this terrible enemy's one weak point was the protoplasmic area on his forehead. Dodging Loki's swipes, Kerberos clawed at Loki's forehead with his burly front paws, leapt away, and leapt at him again, repeating the attack pattern not letting up. Trying to fend off these attacks while using another hand to keep Izanami down, Loki was having more trouble fighting Kerberos than might have been expected.

Loki was not paying any attention to Nakajima at all.

If he was able to seize this chance and hit him in the wound in his forehead, he might be

able to rescue Izanami. If only he had some sort of weapon...Nakajima desperately looked around the chamber, praying to find something he could use.

Right at that moment, Izanami cried out. Turning around in surprise, Nakajima saw her writhing in agony, still under Loki's restraint. But her eyes were not displaying any pain, and it almost seemed as if she was secretly trying to communicate something to him.

What is it you want to say?

Instinctively Nakajima started to step outside of the chamber. As if to warn him, the goddess glared at him, and cried out "Hurry! The fire!"

For an instant Loki was distracted by Izanami's words and looked in Nakajima's direction, but in that instant Kerberos seized the opportunity and slashed him in his forehead, once again drawing his attention.

Fire? What do you mean by fire?

In a moment of epiphany, Nakajima remembered the two spheres that Yomotsu-Shikome had given him. Praying that they would do something, he knocked them together. Twice, three times, pale fireworks shot out, but other than that nothing happened.

"Is this really what Izanami wants...?" Nakajima's palms started sweating with worry.

But the fireworks produced by the spheres knocked together in his last-ditch attempt at doing anything lit the pomade in the room. With a large roar, the flames leapt up and formed a circle in the air. In the center of the pale orange flames, the shape of a human's face formed, and flickered with purpose.

Hi-no-Kagutsuchi...

It was the god of fire, Hi-no-Kagutsuchi, whom Izanami gave birth to immediately before she first died. Even though he had not been taught that name by anyone, Nakajima somehow knew it. Instinctively Nakajima extended his right hand into the flames hovering into the air. Air swirling like a whirlwind, Hi-no-Kagutsuchi's flames painted a spiral shape in the air as they coiled around Nakajima's outstretched hand.

Nakajima bit down on his lip and tried to withstand the heat. It was not like the feeling of skin being scorched by flames, but instead a pain as if the flesh and bone making contact with the flame was somehow boiling, giving off heat from inside. Presently his flame-enveloped arm gave off a great flash of light. It was so blinding that even the battling Loki and Kerberos stopped for a moment.

Rubbing his dazzled eyes, Nakajima realized that in his hand, stretched upward toward the ceiling, he was gripping a sword giving off a crimson phosphorescent glow. An overwhelming power the likes of which he had never experienced flowed through his body.

Without hesitation, Nakajima leapt out of the burial chamber. With this sword giving off an unimaginable aura in his field of vision, Loki's movements faltered for an instant. Not missing a beat, Kerberos bared his fangs and attacked, and the instant Loki tried to brush him aside with his hand, he left his face wide open.

Nakajima thrust the blade forward with all his might. Reflexively, Loki let go of Izanami and tried to cover his forehead with his right hand, but Nakajima's sword clove it in two and with a feeling of heavy resistance, sunk deep into Loki's forehead.

"GYAAAH!"

Loki's cry shook the very walls of the burial pathway. Holding his forehead with his left hand, sword still embedded therein, Loki staggered to his feet. From the lower protoplasmic mass of his lower body, the demon's bronze upper body underwent a rapid transformation. With an unpleasant slimy sound, his bronze skin crumbled away, and the impaled sword clattered to the ground. Loki's entire body transformed into an undefined, undulating lump.

Standing dumbfounded at his own unexpected power, Nakajima watched as one section of the unstable mass of flesh in front of him started throbbing. Suddenly, as if it was a separate life form of its own, a green heart broke through the skin of the protoplasmic mass and tumbled onto the floor. It started to draw a strange figure on the floor with the stream of green blood flowing on it. As it did so, the air seemed to twist in on itself slightly, centered on the figure the heart was drawing.

"That is Loki! Nakajima, do not let the demon escape!"

Pulled back to his senses by Izanami's voice, Nakajima swiftly picked up the Hi-no-Kagutsuchi sword off the floor and thrust it into the heart of Loki as it tried to escape into the warped space.

After an instant of silence, the heart burst like a popped balloon. The undefined mass of flesh stopped writhing.

The silence was broken the next instant as Nakajima was assaulted by a rumbling roar from deep under the floor of the underground valley. Crimson stones started falling from the high ceiling blanketed in darkness.

Still holding the sword, Nakajima tumbled into the burial chamber, as if crawling through the rumbling underground space. The pots shattered one after another, spilling their pomade on the floor. Out of place amongst the chaos, the gentle smell of flowers wafted throughout the room.

"Yumiko..." As Nakajima tried to make out the glowing white form by the entrance of the burial chamber, his consciousness drifted far away.

Epilogue

Thump, Thump.

Something was throbbing. It was a slight rythm, but was definitely there.

Nakajima had already awoken earlier. He had felt warmth, and felt as if he wanted to remain immersed in sleep for just a little longer. As if suddenlystruck by a wave of sentimentality, Nakajima slowly he opened his eyelids. He found that his arms were wrapped around Yumiko. A bittersweet fragrance wafted vibrantly from her body.

"Yumiko..." Hesitantly, Nakajima spoke.

She showed no response to his breath. But she had definitely returned to life. Her formerly rent mouth had returned to its lovely original shope, and her slightly opened lips shivered slightly as she breathed. Her eye sockets were now covered with well-formed eyelids, and her cheeks had a slight pink hue to them.

Nakajima's impatience was enveloped by an untainted presence.

"Don't worry. She will awaken soon enough."

Turning around, Nakajima saw Izanami standing above him. Though her hair was matted with green blood, her shining, beautiful expression, full of kindness, calmed his soul.

The goddess opened her lips. "I will take care of her for a while."

Nakajima was perplexed by her statement.

"It will not be long; only until I strengthen her enough so that she can fight demons."

"Fight demons? But Loki's dead!"

The goddess approached, took Nakajima's hands and looked into his eyes. That instant, white light shone throughout the space in front of his eyes, and all color vanished from his field of vision.

"Look at this scene, Nakajima." Her voice full of worry, Izanami's voice hinted at the gravity of the situation.

As Izanami's fingers grabbed Nakajima's hands, an image clearly formed amongst the white space.

In the Jusho High CAI room that Nakajima was so familiar with, Ohara was sitting at a terminal, desperately talking.

"Loki, why won't you answer!?"

Gripping the microphone as she faced the silent computer, the image of Ohara trembled. Turning the power on and off again and again, she tried to run the demon summoning program. But the host computer's magnetic tapes remained motionless. Only the fans of the air conditioner disturbed the silence of the CAI room.

"Ooh..." Ohara stooped over and grabbed her lower belly. All the blood drained from her face. As if a sign that she was carrying the child of a demon within her, scales had started growing on the white nape of her neck.

"Don't kick!" Ohara whispered as if to scold the new life growing inside her.

As Ohara continued typing on the keyboard with a prayerful look on her face, the magnetic tapes started spinning as if mocking her on a whim.

"Loki, is that you!?" Ohara's eyes glimmered with joy. She tightly gripped the microphone.

"I've been worried about you, Loki!"

At Ohara's words, the magnetic tape slowed its spinning, as if in hesitation. As Ohara cocked her head in suspicion, a low, hoarse voice sounded from the speakers.

"I am Set. Are you the one that calls me?"

"Set? I'm looking for Loki. Loki, please respond. Where are you?" Ohara's hysterical voice echoed throughout the CAI room.

"My name is Set. You are insolent to call the name of another..."

As Izanami let go of Nakajima's hands, the image dispersed, and in its place a gloomy space spread out before his eyes. Sweat from his temples trickled down his neck.

"Set!? That's the most powerful evil god from Egyptian legend!" Nakajima's voice was shaking.

"It's not just Set. Many demons have sensed the pathway you opened to their world, kindling their ambition to conquer the human world. More than just a handful of demons are looking to make an alliance with you...." Izanami's voice was solemn and full of gravity.

Trying to push any indecision out of his mind, Nakajima closed his eyes and spoke.

"This is all my doing, and I have to reap the seeds that I have sown. My mission now is to find a way to close the passageway to the demon world and do so."

"Well spoken." Izanami's expression softened slightly. "It will be difficult, but I am confident your efforts will eventually pay off. I cannot descend to the material world myself so I cannot fight alongside you. However, I will give you Hi-no-Kagutsuchi instead. He is a god that will lend you great power as a sword of flame when you are in danger. Hi-no-Kagutsuchi's power is a force to be reckoned with even amongst the gods of Yamato, and will surely help you."

While listening to Izanami, Nakajima could not help but feel anxious about the still-sleeping Yumiko. Perhaps she knew what he was feeling as the goddess gently put her hand on his shoulder.

"I will give this girl my power. And when she has gotten strong enough to defend herself on her own, I will return her to you. You'll wait that long, right?" Not waiting for an answer to her question, Izanami turned away from Nakajima.

"Soon a messenger from Yomi will come to pick up your friend. Until then, enjoy your brief reunion." With a smile, Izanami quietly lay on top of the dais. As she vanished as if dissolving into the very air, ashes in the form of a human figure remained behind on the stone slab.

"Izanami..." As Nakajima reflexively started toward the disappearing vision of the goddess,

a familiar voice called him to a stop.

"Nakajima, you kept your promise to me!" Turning around, he saw Yumiko looking back at him, her chocolate-brown eyes filled with kindness. Delicate and pure, she leapt into Nakajima's waiting arms.

Translation by: Masakado

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